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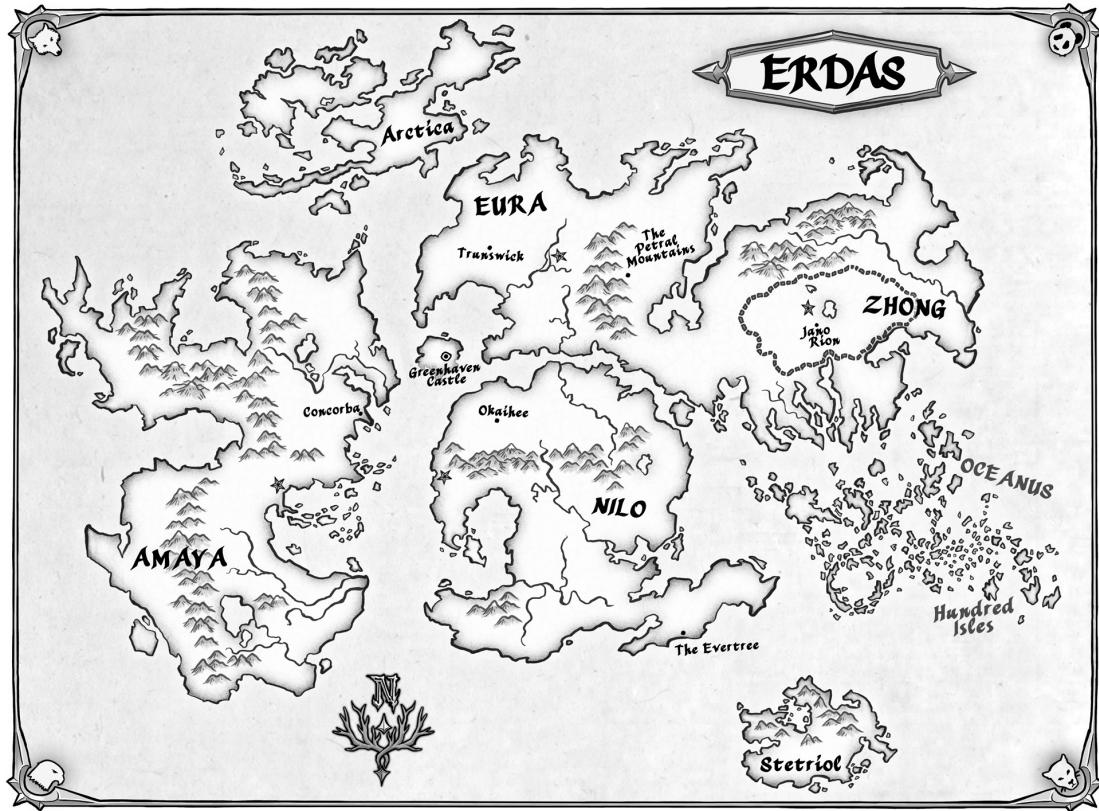
ANIMALS

STORMSPEAKER

Christina Diaz Gonzalez



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For Max: a true animal lover—CDG

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# WARRIOR'S PATH

**A**BEKE TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND HELD IT FOR AN EXTRA second before slowly exhaling. From the deck of the ship, in the minutes before daybreak, she could already sense a change in the air. It felt familiar. Even though they were still far away from the savannahs where she'd been raised, the breeze carried the scent, the warmth, the feel of her homeland. Nilo was on the horizon and it couldn't come soon enough.

The five Greencloaks—Abeke, Conor, Meilin, Rollan, and Anka—had been aboard the small ship for several days, and they still had a ways to travel before reaching their final destination in southern Nilo. Abeke was beginning to believe that Uraza's aversion to water was rubbing off on her. All she wanted to do was step foot on solid land ... but they had to press on. Their priority was to hopefully find a clue about the bond tokens in the library of Takoda's former monastery.

But that hope carried an unwanted partner ... someone Abeke and the rest of the team despised. Someone who had

also returned to the monastery and who might have a few answers for them.

*Kovo.*

Even the thought of the Great Ape made Abeke's stomach turn. The gorilla had masterminded both the First and Second Devourer Wars, killing thousands, including Meilin's father. That was something that couldn't simply be forgotten, even if the new version of Kovo had recently helped them defeat the Wyrm.

The rising sun now streaked the sky with pink and purple rays of light, adding to the beauty of the horizon. Soon Abeke would be seeing Kovo, and she'd have to put aside all her feelings about him.

Abeke stared down into the deep blue water.

Was her anger toward Kovo similar to how people felt about the Greencloaks?

No. She shook away the comparison. It was a different situation. The Greencloaks hadn't acted willingly with the Wyrm—they'd been infected by its parasites. And the Greencloaks had been framed for the assassination of the Emperor of Zhong. Kovo, on the other hand, had done all those terrible things himself. He had taken the world to the brink of human extinction.

*Twice.*

The thought of Kovo and his conniving ways sent a cold shiver down Abeke's back, causing her to shudder. She had to keep her guard up around that Great Beast.

"Couldn't sleep?" Rollan asked, joining Abeke on the deck. "Or just enjoying the sunrise?"

"Neither." Abeke sighed. "Just thinking."

"Yeah, me too." Rollan leaned his back on the rail. "This rickety old ship hasn't been treating us too bad. Then again, it still has another week to go."

Abeke smiled. The Greencloaks had been lucky that Dawson, after hearing about his brother, had insisted on

helping them get out of Eura. Thanks to him, they had supplies, weapons, a ship, and a two-man crew of old fishermen, Milo and Keane.

“I was actually thinking about Kovo,” Abeke admitted. “Not looking forward to seeing him again.”

“Can you imagine how Conor feels? Last time he was in the waters around Takoda’s monastery was when he became infected with the Wyrm’s parasite. This really can’t be easy for him.”

“You’re right. I hadn’t even ... ” Abeke sighed again. She’d been so wrapped up in returning to Nilo that she hadn’t stopped to think about Conor. “Have you talked to him? Is he okay?”

“He’ll be fine,” Meilin said, walking toward them from the bow of the ship. “He’s a Hero of Erdas. He’s a survivor.”

“I was thinking ... ” Anka suddenly appeared next to them. Her chameleon-like abilities still made Abeke uneasy. Abeke had always prided herself on her hunting skills, but this diminutive Greencloak seemed to confound her senses. “If the library doesn’t have any information on the bond tokens, will Kovo tell us if he knows anything? I mean, he helped you with the Wyrm, but that was because the whole world was in peril. He’s not a fan of humans ... or Greencloaks.”

“Maybe being bonded to Takoda has changed him,” Rollan said. “Given him a different perspective.” He glanced up at Essix circling above the ship. “Our spirit animals have changed us. And I’d like to think we’ve changed them, too.”

Just as Rollan finished, Essix screeched and dove past the port side, buzzing right over the top of Rollan’s head as if in protest. Essix was stubborn and headstrong, but there was no denying she had a soft spot for Rollan. They worked

well together, each one fiercely independent yet always loyal.

Meilin snickered. "You've really changed her."

"Very funny, Essix!" Rollan shouted. "Way to support my point."

Essix flew around the ship one more time before coming to rest at the top of the mast.

"Maybe Essix saw something." Conor emerged from belowdecks, a concerned look on his face. He stepped closer to the railing and looked out at the horizon. "In fact, I was coming up to tell you that maybe we shouldn't go to the monastery at all."

Meilin placed a hand on Conor's shoulder. "Conor, it might be difficult for you, after what happened with the Wyrm—"

"That's not it," he interrupted. Conor took a step back and looked at the rest of the group. "I had a vision. It was brief, not a full one like I've had before with the big wave, but I think we have to go somewhere else."

"Where?" Abeke asked, quietly pleased at the thought of avoiding Kovo. "What did you see?"

"It was an enormous hole, or maybe a deep crater, and it had three land bridges ... one on top of the other." Conor closed his eyes for a moment. "It also had a waterfall flowing from the top, past the three bridges, and into a pool at the bottom."

"And a token was there?" Anka inquired. "Like with the Wildcat's Claw, where it was hidden behind the waterfall?"

Conor shook his head. "I don't think so, but it's the first step in finding them. I'm certain of that. And it felt like we weren't too far away."

"Sounds like you're describing the sinkhole of the Taabara Chasm," Abeke said. "It's not too far from here in the northern part of Nilo."

"Northern Nilo ... I like the sound of that!" Rollan grinned broadly. "Less time being seasick always sounds

good to me."

"Well, at least you've been with your spirit animal," Meilin pointed out. "None of us have had ours during the voyage. It'll be good to bring them out."

"Maybe we should split up," Conor said, just as Essix shrieked and took flight again. "A few of us go to the sinkhole while the rest continue on to see Takoda." Conor frowned. "Just in case my vision is wrong."

"I don't know," Anka replied. "I think staying together is a better idea."

"Me too." Abeke reached over and gave Conor's forearm a squeeze. They had been through so much together, and she trusted his instincts. "I believe in your visions.... They haven't been wrong yet."

"Plus, sticking together might prevent a repeat of what happened with ..." Rollan didn't finish the sentence. He had almost broken their unspoken rule.

A hush fell over the group. The experience of having lost Worthy in the cave-in was still raw for everyone. It was all they'd discussed during the first days, but then one morning, without anyone saying a word on the matter, they had stopped talking about it. It wasn't that they weren't thinking of him; they just had to place their full attention on the task at hand. Their survival depended on it.

From that point forward there was no more wondering if they had done the right thing in leaving, no more worrying whether Worthy had made it out alive, no more fearing that the Wildcat's Claw had been found by the Oathbound. The focus was on their mission. They had to find the two remaining bond tokens, Stormspeaker and the Dragon's Eye.

Anka broke the silence. "Abeke, do you know how long it'll take to get to the Taabara Chasm?"

Abeke shrugged. "Not long, but I'd have to check the map. Hold on."

Abeke sprinted below decks, grabbed the map of Nilo, and hurried back to her friends.

“Look.” She opened it up and pointed to a spot in the ocean near the northern coast of the continent. “We’re somewhere in this area. We can tell Milo and Keane to change course and go toward this river.” She ran her fingers down the coastline to the mouth of a river, traced its path inland, and stopped at a place close to some mountains. “Once we dock we can make our way across the savannah, past this hilly area, and the Taabara Chasm should be right there. We might even make it there by tonight or tomorrow morning.” She paused for a moment. “Maybe. I think.”

“Then it’s set.” Rollan thrust his finger toward the sea and grinned. “Onward! To Taabara Chasm!”

“Um, yeah …” Meilin rolled her eyes at Rollan’s over-the-top rally cry, but she couldn’t help smiling. “How about I simply go tell Milo and Keane that we’ve had a change of plans?”

“Just remember …” Conor hesitated, rubbing the faint mark the Wyrm had left on his forehead. “Taabara may only be the beginning, and not the end. I have a feeling that the bond tokens won’t be easy to find.”

“Well, since when have things been easy for us?” Abeke gave Conor a wink. “We like a challenge.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Conor turned to face the coastline, lost in his own thoughts.



The sun was directly overhead when they climbed into the small rowboat. There were no ports in the area, so Milo had anchored the ship in the middle of the river and Keane would now row with them to shore.

“So, how long should we wait for you to return?” Keane asked as they approached the riverbank lined with papyrus

reeds.

Abeke bit her lip. She wanted to have access to the ship, but it didn't seem fair to leave the two old men stuck in the middle of nowhere. "The thing is ... we aren't sure how long we'll be away."

"Well, Dawson paid us for two weeks of travel," Keane replied. "And we've got about a week's worth of food left, so it's your call."

"Could you wait here for a couple of days and then head somewhere back along the coast?" Rollan suggested as the boat drifted closer to the river's edge.

"Sure." Keane nodded. "I have a sister in Badir; it's a small port town not too far away. We could meet up there. I'll give you two more weeks, as Dawson paid us.... That's about all I can take of my sister anyway."

"Badir sounds good." Meilin threw a backpack filled with supplies over her shoulder as the rowboat hit the first of the papyrus reeds. "We'll meet you there if we don't make it back here in time."

"Good luck!" Keane called out. The five Greencloaks jumped out of the boat and into water that was about two feet deep.

Abeke sloshed through the river, pushing aside reeds while her feet sank into the sand and silt with every step she took. Finally the ground became firmer and she climbed up on dry land. Once she was out of the reeds and onto the grass of the savannah, Abeke took a deep breath, relishing the hot sun that beat down on her.

She was home.

And only one thing was missing from the scene.

Abeke pushed aside her cloak and held out her arm. "Join me, Uraza."

The leopard appeared in a flash of light and raised her head to face the sun. The large cat's nostrils twitched as she took in the Niloan air and softly let out a contented purr.

“I know.” Abeke stroked Uraza’s arched back as they took in their surroundings. “I did the same thing. It’s good to be home.” The tall golden grass of the savannah rippled with the soft breeze. The rocky hills they’d have to cross loomed not too far in the distance.

Uraza stretched her legs. Abeke knew what the leopard wanted. “Go,” she whispered.

Uraza immediately jumped through the tall grass, then raced across the savannah toward the hills at full speed. Abeke knew the joy Uraza felt at being free. How fun it would be to race along with her, to hunt for their next meal and savor the midday sun that was baking her shoulders. But now was not the time. They had a mission.

“Uraza’s as happy as I am not to be on that ship anymore,” Rollan observed. The tall grass moved with the leopard, rustling as she sprinted back and forth. “Aren’t you bringing out Briggan, Conor?”

Conor wiped the back of his neck and looked up at the cloudless blue sky. “Think I’ll wait until the day isn’t quite so hot.”

“This is Nilo,” Abeke warned. “If it’s daytime, it’s going to be hot.”

Essix circled the group, screeched to establish her presence in the sky, then flew away once more.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re moving,” Rollan responded to the falcon’s cry. He adjusted his green cloak, backpack, and canteen. “Everyone have their stuff?” Rollan asked.

“Since when are you the responsible one?” Meilin teased.

Rollan smiled. “Since I realized that I’d have to share my water if someone forgot theirs.”

“Really?” Conor could barely hide his smile. “You mean to say you wouldn’t share with Meilin?”

Abeke heard Anka giggle, even though she could no longer be seen.

They were all aware of the feelings between Rollan and Meilin, but no one usually said anything. It was only confirmed by the occasional reddening of Meilin's cheeks and Rollan's quick interest in changing the topic of conversation.

"We're wasting time.... Let's go." Meilin marched ahead, leaving the group behind before Abeke could check to see if her face had turned pink once again.

As the team trekked toward the Taabara Chasm, a few puffy white clouds began to gather, providing occasional relief from the heat. The terrain also changed from the grasses of the savannah to rocky hills dotted with trees. In the distance, what had at first looked like hills quietly morphed into amber-colored mountains, with scattered patches of green.

Stopping for a quick break under the shade of a wide-branched cypress tree, Conor released Briggan. The wolf burst onto the scene and, with his tail wagging, pounced on Conor, knocking him to the ground.

"Whoa," Conor laughed as Briggan placed his two front paws on Conor's chest and raised his snout to sniff the air. Conor ran his hand through the Great Wolf's gray-white fur while the wolf's cobalt-blue eyes analyzed everything. "Sense anything?"

Briggan glanced down at Conor before giving him a quick lick on his forehead. The wolf jumped off to further inspect their surroundings.

"Ha, I would take that as an all clear," Anka said, her body blending with the tree trunk she was leaning against.

Abeke opened up the map and checked their location. From the look of things, it seemed like the sinkhole that formed the Taabara Chasm should be close by.

"Are we headed in the right direction?" Meilin asked.

"Think so," Abeke answered, shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun. She scanned the land for a small stream that might feed into the waterfall of the chasm.

Briggan let out a long howl from somewhere in the distance.

Rollan stretched out his hand to help Conor up. "Sounds like your partner may have found something of interest."

Conor grinned. "Leave it to Briggan to be here five minutes and already track something down."

As they all headed toward the sound of Briggan's howl, Rollan shook his canteen. "I really hope he's found some fresh water, because I'm almost out."

Abeke shook her head. "Hm, who was talking about having enough supplies so we wouldn't have to share water later? Oh yeah, that was you."

"Hey ..." Rollan shrugged, a mischievous smile on his face. "These muscles need the extra hydration."

At that remark, everyone laughed out loud.

"It wasn't *that* funny," Rollan mumbled.

Soon, the group came upon a small stream where Briggan and Uraza had both decided to lounge by its edge.

"Look at those two." Meilin pointed. "They're like—"

"Shhh." Abeke touched her ear. "Listen."

Besides the gurgling sound of the water bouncing off of several rocks in the stream, there was a louder, crashing sound of rushing water cascading down somewhere.

"The waterfall has to be nearby," Abeke said as Rollan filled his canteen with water. "It's got to be downstream."

Abeke and the group followed the stream until the ground dropped, disappearing into a giant sinkhole. From where they stood, at the very edge of the deep crater, they could see the stream cascade down past three land bridges, each of which seemed to bisect the hole at different depths.

"Now what?" Rollan asked, looking down. "Do we go down into that giant rabbit hole, cross one of the bridges, or stay up here?"

"In my vision, I could see the gorge's opening high overhead. The water seemed to be falling from above."

Conor patted Briggan, who had now rejoined them. The wolf nuzzled his hand. "So, I think we have to go to the bottom."

"Yeah," Rollan sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that."

Abeke looked at the western sky, where the sun was already hanging low. They had made good time, but it would be much darker in the gorge. Any remaining light would soon disappear. She could already hear a nightingale chirping in the distance. If they were going to go, they needed to be quick about it.

"What do you think, Uraza?" Abeke asked the leopard, who was peering over the edge right next to her. "Should we head down and see if there's anything there? Or wait until morning?"

Uraza responded by leaping off the rocky ledge onto the path toward the bottom.

"Guess that's your answer," Meilin said, following Uraza with a jump of her own. She looked back up at the rest of the group. "Come on!"

Once at the bottom of the crater, Meilin released Jhi. The Great Panda lumbered over to Meilin, and their foreheads touched. The genuine affection between the two was obvious to Abeke. Then Jhi waddled over to where Briggan and Uraza were lapping up water from the edge of the small pond. The entire team spread out, hunting for a clue as to why Conor's vision had brought them here.

Abeke first searched behind the waterfall, hoping that there might be a cave like in Eura, but there was nothing there.

"Maybe it's like the Heart of the Land." Rollan touched the token that hung under his shirt. "Hidden within a rock somewhere."

"There are a million rocks here, though," Anka said.

"How about hidden along a path?" Conor pointed to a narrow chasm through the mountain walls.

Abeke walked over to him. “Are you saying we should go through there?” The opening would require them to enter single file. If it got much narrower, their spirit animals would certainly not fit. As it was, Jhi already couldn’t enter.

“See how the ground is worn down in spots?” Conor pointed to the rock floor. “I think this is a path that’s been used before. Used a lot.”

Meilin and Rollan joined them, each peering into the long, narrow chasm.

“We should explore in there before it gets much darker,” Meilin said. “Don’t you think, Rollan?”

Rollan didn’t answer. He only stared into it.

“Rollan?” Conor repeated his name.

Meilin placed a hand on Rollan’s shoulder. “You’re thinking of Tarik, aren’t you?” she said. “The last battle you fought with him.”

“It looked a lot like this place,” he muttered. “Same type of chasm. A warrior’s last path.”

“But it’s not that place, and we aren’t battling the Devourer or the Conquerors,” Meilin replied in a gentle voice.

Suddenly a sense of unease filled Abeke. This *would* be a good place for an ambush. She glanced around, her hunter instincts on full alert.

It was too quiet.

Even the nightingale had stopped singing. Something was off.

“I think we should get out of here,” Abeke said in a hushed voice. “Maybe have Essix see if—”

Before Abeke could finish her sentence, a hooded figure jumped down and twirled a quarterstaff in front of them.

“Now!” came a shout from above, and suddenly warriors wearing gray cloaks rained down all around them.

First, one dropped behind Abeke. Then another in front. Then two more blocked the path forward through the

chasm.

Abeke pulled an arrow from her quiver and nocked it to her bow, just as Meilin drew out her sword.

In a split second, more than two dozen cloaked figures had jumped down from the cliffs ... all pointing their weapons at the five Greencloaks or at their spirit animals over by the pond. High above all of them, balanced on the natural bridge, another dozen attackers stood with arrows trained on Abeke and her friends.

There was no escape.... They were trapped!



## GIANT HAIRBALL

**F**IGHTING A LOSING BATTLE WAS NEVER ROLLAN'S FIRST choice. He had learned on the streets of Concorba that diplomacy could work wonders. Words often yielded better results than any sword. Disarm them with a smile whenever possible.

Rollan quickly assessed the situation. Jhi, Briggan, and Uraza were surrounded, but they would be able to take care of themselves. The four Greencloaks had taken defensive stances against the hooded warriors, but Rollan wasn't sure where Anka had gone. She'd camouflaged herself so well that he couldn't see her at all. What Rollan *could* see was that these people weren't dressed in all black like the Oathbound.

Perhaps he could convince them that they weren't enemies.

"Friends, friends." Rollan lowered his dagger and took a step toward one of the figures. "We mean you no harm." He acted calm, as if the Greencloaks had the upper hand, instead of the other way around.

“Rollan … ” Meilin’s voice carried a warning that this approach might not be the best idea.

Rollan ignored her. She was a warrior at heart. Her instinct was always to fight. But he had to use his gut. He took another step. “We aren’t here for a battle. We’re only in search of something. Perhaps you could help.”

The response came swiftly. The hooded figure in front of him spun his quarterstaff in the air, then swung it low at Rollan’s knees, trying to knock his legs out from under him.

Rollan jumped over the end and quickly grabbed the pole, yanking it out of the hooded figure’s hand and turning it on him.

So much for diplomacy.

“STOP!” a voice called from above. Another hooded warrior appeared from an opening near one of the land bridges. The figure ran along a path to the bottom, leaping down the last few feet to skid to a halt right in front of Rollan. “Don’t harm these people. These *are* our friends.”

Rollan couldn’t believe it.... His plan had worked.

The cloaked figure pulled back his gray hood.

“TAKODA!” Meilin exclaimed.

Takoda smiled and rushed over to be embraced by Meilin, Abeke, Conor, and Rollan. “I’m so glad that you’re all safe!” he exclaimed, but then lowered his voice to a whisper. “I heard what happened with the Emperor of Zhong. How could the Greencloaks do something like that? What’s going on?”

“It was a setup by people impersonating us,” Meilin answered. “We’re trying to make things right again.”

Takoda didn’t hesitate. “How can I help?” he asked. “Do you want me to go with you somewhere? Maybe give you a place to hide with the monks?”

Rollan stared at Takoda. The boy had grown about four inches since he’d last seen him. He’d also become more muscular.

But along with Takoda came Kovo, who was bonded to the young monk. Rollan didn't love the idea of traveling with the once subjugator of Erdas. "Have you heard of something called Stormspeaker ... or the Dragon's Eye?"

Takoda shook his head. "What are they?"

"Important items we need in order to clear our names and unite Erdas," Conor explained. "We believe at least one of them is found in Nilo."

Murmuring had risen from the cloaked figures. The monks still had their weapons trained on the group and their spirit animals.

"Takoda, what's going on?" someone shouted.

Takoda turned around. "Everyone, please ... lower your weapons." He pushed down the spear of one of the nearby monks. "These are my friends, the ones I've told you about. The ones who helped defeat the Wyrm. The Heroes of Erdas. We should be welcoming them, not threatening them."

Briggan growled at one of the hooded monks and Rollan could see Uraza's muscles tense and tauten. Even Jhi was staring down the person in front of her.

"Place your spirit animals in passive state," Takoda whispered. "The monks won't relax if they're out."

Meilin, Abeke, and Conor glanced at each other. They each quietly nodded and called back their animals.

Rollan could see the hesitation among the monks, but they slowly put away their weapons and pulled back their hoods in an apparent symbol of acceptance.

Takoda had risen to become a leader in his community. This was definitely not the same boy Rollan had first encountered moping in Greenhaven. The battles underground against the Wyrm had clearly changed him ... or was it Kovo's influence? Had the bond between him and the Great Beast caused him to grow in his command of others? Was it just a sign of growing up? Rollan wasn't

sure. Perhaps Kovo had changed, too. Doubtful, but anything was possible.

“Do you know someone who might help us?” Meilin asked.

Rollan feared that the answer would be Kovo, but Takoda surprised them. “I don’t know *someone* with answers, but I know *someplace* that might have them. Come with me.” Takoda motioned for the group to follow him into the chasm.

“No!” The monk who had attacked Rollan leaped forward, blocking the entrance. “You can’t take them into Maktaba. You’d be placing everyone and everything at risk.”

“Step aside, Sodu.” Takoda stared him down. “I think I’ve earned the right to bring four guests—four *friends*—into our community.”

Sodu didn’t back off. “They’re wanted by the Oathbound! I’ve heard the rumors of what happens to those who help Greencloaks. We can’t allow them entrance. The library has never been seized, because strangers are not permitted inside.”

“These four aren’t strangers,” Takoda argued. “They’re known to everyone.”

“Ahem.” Anka cleared her throat. She took two steps forward, away from the mountain wall where she had been camouflaging herself, and allowed herself to be seen. “There’s five of us, actually.”

Takoda spun around. He hadn’t noticed her, even though she’d been standing so close to him.

“Anka’s with us,” Meilin quickly explained. “Her spirit animal is a chameleon. We can vouch for her, though.”

“You see!” Sodu mocked Takoda. “You can’t even recognize danger when it’s right next to you.” He turned to the monks as Anka blended back into the colors of the mountain. “My brothers, we cannot let them enter. There’s

no telling what will happen if they do. We would be putting everything at risk."

"What I see"—Takoda spoke to Sodu through clenched teeth—"is someone who pretends to be strong, but is afraid of his own shadow."

"Look who's talking!" Sodu exclaimed. "The boy who couldn't be trusted to travel alone, but who required the guidance of a superior student to accompany him to Maktaba."

Takoda's eyes narrowed. "And when none could be found, they told me to bring you."

"Ha! Nice try, but we all know the truth," Sodu scoffed. "You are still only a boy."

"We'll see about that." Takoda sneered and took a few steps forward. He lifted his arms and addressed the other monks in a loud, booming voice. "Brothers and sisters, you all know me and trust my judgment. These are my friends, the ones who defeated the Devourer and then helped destroy the Wyrm. They are the Heroes of Erdas, who have selflessly risked everything for Nilo ... for the entire world. They come to us seeking answers and rest ... something only we can offer. Isn't it our duty to share our knowledge with the righteous and stand against the Oathbound? Will you not rise up, stiffen your resolve, and aid them?"

There were whispers among the monks. A sense of purpose was filling the cavern.

"We are being called to be *part* of history," Takoda continued, "instead of just preserving the historical accounts. We cannot turn our backs on those who defended us. We have a duty, so I ask you ..." He paused for a moment, capturing everyone's attention. "Who will join me in leading these heroes to find the answers they seek? Who stands with me and with the Heroes of Erdas?"

"I do!" shouted one monk.

"As do I!" yelled another.

"I DO!" hollered the remaining monks in unison. All except Sodu, who stayed silent with his arms crossed.

"To the Heroes of Erdas!" Takoda shouted, raising a fist in the air.

"THE HEROES OF ERDAS!" the monks roared back.

"Glad he's on our side," Rollan whispered to Conor as he followed Takoda into the chasm.

As the Greencloaks walked through the narrow passage, it continued closing in on either side. Soon it was impossibly tight, like a fissure running up the mountain. As night fell and the light waned, Takoda lit a small lantern. Rollan glanced up the steep rock walls at the sliver of dark sky above them. He knew Essix was flying above them somewhere, giving them protection from the air.

"So what's the deal with your friend Sodu?" Rollan asked Takoda. "Not the friendliest monk I've seen ... not that I've actually seen any before today. Except for you, of course."

"Yeah, we have some history," Takoda explained. "We were together at the other monastery before I bonded with Kovo. After everything that happened with the Wyrm, we were both sent here. He's not my biggest fan."

Rollan chuckled at the understatement. "You think?"

"Almost there!" Takoda called back to the others as the path opened up to a ledge high up on a mountain.

"Finally. I was wondering when we'd get ... whoa!" Rollan waved his arms, trying to maintain his balance as Takoda yanked him back. In the darkness, he had misjudged where the ledge ended and almost stepped off.

"We're about two hundred feet up and it's a straight drop," Takoda warned.

"A little more notice next time," Rollan muttered over the pounding of his heart.

"Wow," Conor said as he stepped onto the ledge. "I didn't even realize the incline was taking us so high."

“The monastery is up there.” Takoda pointed to a few twinkling lights in the distance. The moonlight revealed enough of the monastery that Rollan could tell it had been built into the mountainside, about two-thirds of the way to the top.

“Guess we have to take one of these rope ladders the rest of the way up?” Rollan tugged on a pair of old ropes with wooden rungs fastened between them. None of it looked very sturdy. “It’s about another two hundred feet?”

“Two fifty,” Takoda corrected.

“This could explain why you don’t get many visitors,” Meilin added. “Though it does remind me of parts of Zhong.” She grabbed the first ladder’s wooden rung and hoisted herself up.

“Before we all get there, I, um ...” Takoda suddenly seemed unsure of himself.

“Spit it out,” Meilin said.

“Yeah, so, I was going to ask that you not bring out Uraza, Briggan, or Jhi when we get up there. Maktaba is, well, a sort of *particular* place, if you haven’t noticed. Not that I don’t want them around, but I’m not sure what the reaction would be.”

“From who?” Abeke asked. “The monks or Kovo?”

Takoda sighed. “Both, I guess.”

They all knew there was no love lost between their spirit animals. Kovo had killed the Four Great Beasts during the First Devourer War and had in turn been killed by them during the second. They had reluctantly worked together to defeat a common enemy, but no one truly knew what would happen if they were thrust together again. Still, Rollan didn’t like the idea of having to accommodate Kovo.

“I think Kovo will just have to figure it out,” Abeke said in a cool, unforgiving voice. “We’ve all had to deal with him.”

"But we're guests," Conor reasoned. "Let's not stir up any trouble."

"Kovo is different now," Takoda said as they each began climbing the ladders. "You'll see."

Rollan was about to make a joke when he glanced down at the steep drop to the bottom and felt his head spin. Devastating quips would have to wait, since he needed all his concentration to not fall. As they continued up the mountain, the glow of the moon rising over the adjacent mountain peak cast a dim light over their surroundings. It was nighttime, but Rollan wasn't looking anywhere except at the rung right above him. It seemed as if everyone was focused on the climb, because no one spoke. In fact, all Rollan could hear were the occasional grunts and sighs as someone paused to catch their breath before pressing on.

Once they arrived at the monastery, Rollan turned to look back at the view. An enormous sense of peace washed over him. It was a combination of the beauty of the thousand stars above him and the moon rising silently in the sky. Wind whispered past the oil lanterns lighting the entrance to Maktaba. For the first time in weeks he felt safe, a security provided by the remote location.

"Nice, huh?" Takoda smiled, taking it all in as if for the first time. "Just be careful with the thorns that line the bushes near the entrance." He waited for the remaining Greencloaks and then motioned for them all to follow him. "Come on, I think someone may want to see you."

"I doubt it," Abeke muttered as she walked past Rollan.

Rollan nodded in agreement. Kovo couldn't have changed that much.

The group passed several monks in the wide corridors who silently stared as they walked by.... It seemed that word of their arrival was spreading throughout the monastery.

"This is the Great Hall," Takoda said, entering a large room where oil lamps hung from the many rafters that

crisscrossed the vaulted ceiling. There were a few monks eating at one of the long dining tables on the right side of the room, and a fire burned in the massive fireplace on the opposite end. “Figured you might want to stop and get something to eat before—”

“MEILIN! CONOR!” someone shouted while running down a darkened staircase in the corner. “ROLLAN! ABEKE!”

Takoda smiled. “Told you someone would want to see you.”

A girl with white hair and almost translucent skin rushed into the light.

It was Xanthe, the Sadrean warrior Meilin and Conor had met while battling the Wyrm underground. “I can’t believe you’re all here!” She hurried over and pulled Meilin close to her. “Takoda and I heard about what happened to your surface elder—er, emperor. How could—”

“It wasn’t us,” Meilin explained. “They were imposters.”

Xanthe tapped Takoda in the chest with the back of her hand. “What did I tell you? I knew it couldn’t be real Greencloaks.”

“And since when are you a monk, Xanthe?” Conor teased. “Or are you here for another reason?”

Takoda blushed at the insinuation, but Xanthe simply rolled her eyes. “I’m here to give a record of my people’s history. Preserve the Sadrean stories for future generations.”

“How are things in Sadre now?” Meilin asked.

“Still recovering. Phos Astos will never be the same, but it’s being rebuilt ... slowly.”

“Sounds like several places we’ve seen,” Anka said.

Xanthe scanned the room. “Who said that?”

“Oh.” Meilin spun around. “That’s Anka. I forgot to introduce the two of you. Anka, Anka, where are you?”

“Right here.” Anka stepped away from a purple curtain in a dark corner of the room, her skin and clothing

changing from purple to their natural coloring. “Don’t mind me. Nobody does. Pleasure to meet you, Xanthe.”

“Uh, yes, nice to meet you, too,” Xanthe replied as Anka moved into the shadows and blended back into her surroundings.

That was when the group noticed him: a large looming figure who sat in the darkest corner of the space, draped in shadow and staring out the window. His massive back was turned to the group, but there was no mistaking him.

*Kovo.*

“Guess we don’t merit even a glance from him,” Abeke speculated.

“That’s not it,” Takoda explained. “Ever since we stopped the Wyrm, Kovo’s gone almost completely silent. He rarely communicates with me, and he refuses to go into passive form.”

Rollan cautiously drew closer to the Great Ape. “Is something wrong? Did someone take his banana away?”

Takoda shook his head. “It’s part of his healing journey. Being here has given him the peace to deal with the things he’s done in the past. He wants, no, he needs time for himself.”

“Hmpf.” Meilin didn’t seem to be buying it.

“So he won’t be able to give us information on Stormspeaker or the Dragon’s Eye?” Conor asked.

“Afraid not,” Takoda said. “He won’t react to anyone.” He looked to one of the corridors, where some of the monks were carrying trays of food. “I’ll get you some dinner. Sit and rest for a moment.”

Xanthe escorted them to one of the tables. “So those things you mentioned … what are they?”

“Important gifts we have to find for the Greencloaks,” Abeke said, being purposefully vague.

“It’s too bad Kovo can’t help,” Xanthe said.

“We’ll see about that.” Rollan got up from the table and walked over to Kovo. He stood directly in front of the gorilla, looking up at him.

“Rollan …” Meilin didn’t sound pleased. “What are you doing?”

“I want to see if he’s really as unaware as he’d have us believe.” Rollan clapped his hands loudly in front of Kovo’s red eyes, but the giant gorilla didn’t even blink.

“Rollan!” Abeke raced over and pulled Rollan away just as he began waving his hands in front of Kovo’s face.

“Are you crazy?” Abeke shook her head in disbelief. “Kovo could toss you out that window!”

“We need answers, right?” Rollan broke away from Abeke’s grip and returned to stand in front of Kovo. “Listen, you giant hairball, we need to find Stormspeaker and the Dragon’s Eye. If you’re as smart as you pretend to be, prove it by telling us where they are.”

Silence.

Rollan stood on his toes to get eye-to-eye with Kovo. “You really are one ugly, selfish—”

“Rollan!” Takoda had returned, carrying a tray with several plates of food.

Rollan continued. “Foul-smelling, mangy, good-for-nothing waste of—”

Takoda slammed the tray down on the table and began marching toward Rollan.

“An unwise move, brave Amayan warrior,” an unfamiliar voice called out from the hall’s entryway, stopping Takoda in his tracks. “Best not to taunt someone who can later exact revenge. Kovo can hear you; he only chooses not to react … yet.”

Rollan’s mouth twitched and he swallowed the lump that had formed in the back of his throat. He peered around Kovo’s massive chest and saw an old man, his back bent down with the weight of the years, leaning on a gnarled,

wooden cane for support. “Yes, well, I was only trying to provoke a reaction, so he’d snap out of it and help us.”

“Reacting out of anger or fear is rarely a good decision. A lesson for Kovo … and perhaps for you.”

Rollan was about to respond when Takoda interjected.

“Everyone, I want to introduce you to the Honorable Naveb of Maktaba.” He paused as the old man gave the group a slight nod. “He’s one of our esteemed elders and our greatest librarian. He knows where to find all sorts of secrets.”

Meilin bowed in acknowledgment of the elder. “Sir, we’re looking for information about—”

“Yes, yes.” The old man raised a hand. “I may be old, but I could still hear the instigator over there while he was tormenting Kovo.”

“That’s not exactly what—” Rollan stopped speaking as Abeke gave him a gentle nudge. Silence was a virtue that often escaped Rollan.

“I see you’re from this land.” Naveb motioned to Abeke. “I hope you are brighter than your friend there.”

“Sir,” Abeke responded with respect, “we each have our unique strengths, which—”

“Blah, blah, blah.” Naveb turned around. “Well, come on. Grab your food and let’s go. I’m not getting any younger.” He headed down a dimly lit hallway. “We have work to do … if you can pass the test.”



3

## NEFRINI'S CROWN

**M**EILIN EYED THE OLD MONK. HE WAS BALD, WITH A short white beard that stood out against his dark skin. His cane tapped the stone floors with a deliberate, rhythmic pattern as he led the group down the maze of corridors. At first glance, the old man appeared frail and unsteady, but to Meilin there was something in the way he had held her gaze that made her think he was much more.... She just didn't know what.

"Where are we going?" Meilin whispered to Xanthe.

"One of the libraries, I think," she answered. "There are several of them here."

They entered a large circular room filled with thousands of books, piled all the way to the rafters. Meilin could only marvel at the size of the place. She'd seen many libraries in her lifetime, but this one room rivaled the largest of them.

Naveb waited for them in the center of the room. He stood motionless, his eyes closed and both of his hands resting on his cane.

One minute passed, then another.

Meilin glanced at Takoda, hoping he'd reveal a clue about what was happening. He merely shrugged. The silence had become uncomfortable. They were wasting time ... time that could be spent looking for the bond tokens. Was this part of the test he'd mentioned? Meilin considered bringing Jhi out of passive state so she could give Meilin the serenity to see things clearly, perhaps pick up on some cues they were overlooking.

"Um, Master Naveb, are we waiting for something?" Conor asked.

Naveb did not answer, but instead approached Conor. He stared at the faint mark of the Wyrm on his forehead, then narrowed his eyes in recognition of the symbol. "Ah, so you are the one. The Greencloak who took Takoda from the monastery. The one who succumbed to the Wyrm in Sadre, and eventually turned on him and all his allies."

"Yes, but what happened there ... I didn't have a choice," Conor explained hastily.

"There's always a choice," Naveb responded sharply. "And you made yours."

"No, no. You don't understand. I had no control." Conor rubbed the mark, as if he could wipe away its stain.

Meilin's blood began to boil. She could not allow this man to insult Conor for being infected by the Wyrm, even if he was an elder. She knew how hard Conor had battled against it, what he had sacrificed, and how some of his actions while under the Wyrm's influence still tore at his heart. It wasn't fair to him and it wasn't fair to what they'd all endured.

"Regardless of what you say, you are not like the others. Not even the instigator." Naveb pointed to the door. "You will have to leave before we can continue."

"Excuse me, sir ..." Meilin summoned up every lesson in self-control that she'd learned while growing up in the palaces of Zhong. "But you have no right to say that to Conor. I don't know what Xanthe or Takoda told you, but

Conor is no less than a hero." Meilin glanced over at Conor. "He is, and always will be, one of us. If he goes, we all go."

"And do you all feel the same way?" Naveb looked toward Rollan and Abeke.

"Absolutely," Rollan said, walking to stand next to Conor. "We can always find answers somewhere else."

Abeke took Conor's hand, linking her fingers with his, and lifted their intertwined hands. "We're a team. Now and forever."

"I see." Naveb took a step back. "But you won't find answers anywhere else." He was barely able to hide a smirk beneath his beard. "You will stay and find your answers here, because you have passed my test." He walked over to a black ladder with wheels on the bottom. "It is said that those who pursue the bond tokens must be united in mind and spirit. I would never help a fractured group seeking such powerful items." He rolled the ladder along a metal railing that ran around the room. "Despite being young, you have endured much, and yet you're still united. That is why I will help."

Meilin's mouth dropped open. "So you only said those things to see if you could split us up? You didn't really mean it."

"No, I meant what I said. I always do." He stopped and climbed the first two steps. "That boy is an instigator, and the other one's choices have set him apart from his friends."

They were back to where they'd started ... being disrespected.

"Most Honored Naveb," Takoda began, "these are the Heroes of—"

"Here it is!" Naveb pulled out a book from the shelf. He turned to look down at Takoda's concerned face. "My dear boy, I am not insulting your friends. I am merely speaking the truth." He took a cautious step down, then another. "Is the one from Amaya not an instigator? Every group needs

someone to get things moving, and to lighten the mood when our burdens become too heavy.”

Naveb took his cane in one hand and tucked the book beneath his other arm. “And the Euran boy, was it not his choice to stand and fight on behalf of Kovo—his once enemy—at great risk to himself? His actions have shown him to be kind and selfless. He is forgiving of others’ mistakes ... but he has yet to extend that forgiveness to himself.”

The old monk hobbled over to a small desk, set down the book, and looked at Meilin. “Am I not right about your friends?”

Meilin didn’t say anything, but he did have a point about Rollan and Conor.

“You know I am, warrior girl.” Naveb struck a match and lit an oil lamp on the desk. He opened the book, then looked back at Meilin and chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Meilin asked.

“You,” Naveb replied. Then he returned to the book, flipping through the first few pages. “A fighter who must battle herself to achieve what she truly wants.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Meilin scoffed, but she caught Rollan and Abeke exchanging a smirk.

Naveb shook his head and sighed. “I was once like you. Pretending to be tough in spirit. You will learn.” He pointed to a page in the book. “Now, Niloan girl, come and look at this. It tells of Stormspeaker.”

Abeke rushed forward and Meilin followed, peering over her shoulder at the book. In the middle of one of the pages was a drawing of a slender, dark-skinned woman with a tall, elegant bird standing by her side.

“Isn’t that Nefrini, the High Chieftess of Nilo, with her spirit animal, Nazir?” Abeke asked.

The old monk nodded. “I see you know your Niloan history, but here is something you won’t find in any other book or library.” He turned the page to a listing of property

owned by Nefrini. At the very top was the word *Stormspeaker*.

"Whoa," Abeke muttered. "Stormspeaker was hers and Nazir's."

"What does it say about the bond token?" Conor asked.

"It describes Stormspeaker as being made of gold, with a brilliant green stone in its center," Meilin said.

Abeke ran her finger down the page, looking for another clue. "But not what it is or where to find it."

"As you are a hunter, I thought you'd be more observant," Naveb chided. "Your prey is not always in front of you, but sometimes behind you."

Abeke glanced at Conor standing in the back, then realized what Naveb meant. "The earlier page. The one with the drawing."

"Perhaps there is hope for you yet," Naveb said, flipping back to the image of Nefrini.

"Stormspeaker is her crown!" Abeke exclaimed.

Anka appeared next to Abeke, squeezing past Conor, Rollan, and Meilin. "You're right. It's made of gold and the front has a bird grasping a green stone in its beak."

"Not just any bird," Naveb corrected, unfazed by Anka's sudden appearance.

"A hammerkop, also known as a lightning bird." Abeke smiled. "Like Nazir."

"But where do we find this crown?" Rollan asked.

"Ah ... for that we will have to look in one of our other books." Naveb scanned the room. "I believe the only reference we have is in a journal left behind by a Greencloak who visited long ago." He stroked his beard. "Now, where would that book be?" He hobbled over to one of the shelves and began running his hand over the spines of several books.

"Did you meet this Greencloak?" Abeke asked.

“Oh, no.” Naveb kept searching. “He visited before I was even born.”

“Then it’s *really* ancient history,” Rollan said with a smirk.

Naveb either didn’t hear him or chose to ignore the comment. “Here it is,” he said, pulling out a thin, leather-covered journal with the name *Tembo* engraved in gold letters on the front, and passed it to Takoda.

“Stop!” Sodu burst in and yanked the book from Takoda’s hands. “Master Naveb, you cannot trust these killers. They should never have been allowed entry. Anything they discover might be traced to us. We could be judged as conspirators. Don’t you understand? We’ll be labeled traitors!”

“Sodu,” Master Naveb sighed. “I understand things completely.”

Takoda lunged for the book just as Sodu spun around the desk, keeping out of reach.

“Give it back,” Meilin demanded, stalking Sodu around the desk, while Conor slowly approached from behind. She was waiting for the right moment to attack. “If you know what’s good for you.”

Sodu met Meilin’s gaze, then a slight smile crept across his face. “Guess this book is pretty important, huh?”

Before Meilin could react, Sodu grabbed the oil lamp and smashed the glass on the corner of the desk.

“What are you doing?” Abeke yelled.

Sodu’s eyes narrowed as he held the thin book over the open flame, the bottoms of the pages curling with the heat. “Leave now,” he snarled, “or this book burns.”



## LETTERS

CONOR AND THE OTHER GREENCLOAKS BACKED AWAY from Sodu, raising their hands in surrender, knowing that the book he held over the flame might be their only lead to finding Stormspeaker. In return, Sodu's lips tipped up to form a victorious sneer. But his delight in having the upper hand lasted only for a moment.

*Whack!*

Sodu's eyes bulged as all the air left his lungs.

Master Naveb's cane had come flying across Sodu's back with resounding speed. Before anyone could react, Master Naveb spun his cane and slapped the book high into the air. He then twisted into a roundhouse kick, striking Sodu in the chest. As Sodu tumbled to his knees, Master Naveb slid across the room and caught the book before it could hit the floor. Slowly, he pulled himself up with his cane and dusted off the cover of the journal.

"Hold on to it a little tighter this time," he said, handing the book back to Takoda.

Conor couldn't believe what he had just witnessed. The old monk was an incredible fighter. He was equal parts

grace, strength, instinct, and speed. They could all learn so much from him.

“Master Naveb …” Sodu staggered up.

“Leave this library,” Master Naveb ordered. “We will discuss your punishment later.”

Sodu kept his gaze on the floor. “I truly meant no harm or disrespect.”

“Yet you committed both,” Naveb said dryly. “Your lack of trust in my decision confirms what I told Ananda when she sent you here with Takoda. I cannot teach someone who only sees with eyes of fear.”

Sodu lifted his head. “No, Master.” His voice had an edge to it. “I fear only *one* thing. I fear what your recklessness will bring down upon this place.” He turned on his heel and stormed out of the library before anything else could be said.

No one moved. Sodu had left, but traces of the turmoil he’d brought seemed to linger.

Rollan broke the silence. “I think he may now have a fear of canes, too,” he said with a grin.

Master Naveb shot Rollan a stern look and the boy’s grin disappeared.

“Master Naveb, those moves …” Meilin said with barely restrained awe. “It was as if you were flying.”

This comment seemed to please the old monk. His face softened and his shoulders relaxed. “Yes, well, once a warrior, always a warrior.” He pointed to Takoda. “Go ahead and open the Greencloak’s journal. If there’s any information about where to find Stormspeaker, it’ll be there.”

Takoda gently placed the book on the desk and opened it. He glanced sheepishly at Conor. “You should probably do this and not me,” he said, stepping aside. “I’m no Greencloak.”

Conor hesitated. “You might not be wearing the cloak, but you’re just as much a hero as any of us. We owe you a lot, Takoda. And we wouldn’t even *have* the book if you hadn’t gotten us in here.” He placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Go on, you should be the one to read it.”

Takoda shook his head. “But you are—”

“Oh, for the love of—” Meilin gently pushed Conor and Takoda aside. “Why don’t I just read it?”

“Well, *someone* should read the book, considering everything that just happened.” Master Naveb hobbled toward the door. “Speaking of which, I should go see about that foolish Sodu. He’s had enough time to contemplate his actions.”

“Thank you for pointing us in the right direction, Master Naveb,” Conor said as he accompanied the old monk to the door.

“Yes, thank you!” Rollan shouted in agreement.

“Meh!” Master Naveb waved them both off without turning around. “Such noise! A library is supposed to be a place of quiet contemplation,” he complained, but as he turned the corner, Conor caught the slightest smile on the old monk’s face.

“Come here, Conor,” Abeke urged as they all gathered around the desk where Meilin was hunched over the journal, her face close to the pages.

“The lettering is faded in some parts,” Meilin muttered. “And he writes in this ornate calligraphy-like style.”

She scanned the first pages. “This beginning part is all about Tembo’s travels … where he eats and sleeps.” She read a little further into the journal. “Oh, and here he is talking about some earlier battles and the formation of the Greencloaks.” She gasped. “He was there when Briggan and the other Four Fallen united the Greencloaks against the first Devourer! And he claims that he once rode on Uraza’s back?”

"That ... doesn't sound like Uraza," Rollan said doubtfully.

"What does it say about Stormspeaker and the Dragon's Eye?" Anka asked from an unseen location, the shadows of the library giving her even more camouflage than usual.

"Nothing yet ..." Meilin continued reading. "But I'm beginning to think we've been walking in this Tembo's footsteps all along. According to his journal, he's the mysterious Greencloak who hid the Wildcat's Claw in Wilcoskov. And it says here that ..." Meilin looked up, her eyes wide. "He was the one who started the tradition of Greencloak leaders passing down the Heart of the Land. *Tembo* was the first leader of the Greencloaks." She glanced down again, her finger stopping halfway on the page. "Oh, here's something even more interesting ... "

"What?" Xanthe leaned over the desk from the opposite side.

"He's describing his approach to the monastery. Climbing a rope ladder and being greeted by several monks. They welcomed him and gave him a place to stay." Meilin turned the page. "It says that the monks grew suspicious of him when they discovered that he was carrying two dangerous and powerful items."

"That was probably them!" Rollan interjected.

Meilin paused and raised a single eyebrow. "Are you going to let me finish?"

Rollan gave her a quick bow in mock deference. "By all means, my lady. Continue."

Meilin took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "Yes, it says that the two objects were the crown of Nefrini, known as Stormspeaker, and an orb called the Dragon's Eye. That night a group of monks confronted Tembo. There was some type of argument. The monks tried to convince Tembo to give up the objects." Meilin flipped the page. "This can't be," she muttered, turning back to the prior page.

“What’s wrong?” Rollan peered over her shoulder.

“It seems like Tembo took off and left behind this journal with a note for the monks.” She turned the page again and pointed to the words written in square, blocky letters. They were different from the rest of the journal. “It says, and I quote ...” Meilin read the words carefully. *“I depart as you wish, but in light of what is written, the orb carries on to no one, and the key to finding Stormspeaker is nowhere to be found.”*

“He’d rather destroy them than have the monks guard them?” Takoda took a step back. “Why?”

“No.” Conor shook his head. “A Greencloak wouldn’t do that with something so important. There has to be a mistake,” Conor insisted. “Read it again.” His vision had led them to this place for a reason. Even though something made him wary, he *knew* they were on the right track. They were close, he was sure of it.

Rollan read over Meilin’s shoulder. “That’s what it says. I don’t think it means that he destroyed it, but he probably hid it in such a way that he thought no one would ever find it.”

The bookshelves appeared to shift under the light of the oil lamp as Anka moved away from the far corner. “Well, we have to go look for the hiding place,” Anka said. “We didn’t come all this way for nothing.”

Xanthe sighed. “But where do you start? Do you have any other leads?”

Conor thought about the vision that had brought them here. Perhaps they weren’t supposed to be searching for the bond tokens in Nilo. Maybe that was what they needed to discover. That the answers were somewhere else. “Maybe we should move on to Zhong. Try to find answers there.”

“No. We can’t simply move on because this didn’t pan out,” Anka countered. “Since when do Greencloaks give

up?" She paused, allowing her words to sink in. "Stormspeaker could still be here, and Kovo might have some answers. We can ask him again," she suggested. "He probably knows about Tembo."

"You're right, but this time you can do the asking," Rollan replied. "I think I may have pushed my luck with that gorilla. Maybe he'll like that now-you-see-me, now-you-don't trick."

"No, Kovo is off-limits," Takoda stated. "I won't put him at risk. He may not look it, but he's very fragile right now."

Rollan opened his mouth to say something, but seemed to think better of it.

"Anka's right, though.... We have to try other options. Why don't we look through more records?" Meilin walked around the room. "There are different libraries in this monastery, right? So there must be other books and scrolls. Maybe we can find a clue somewhere else."

"I'll go find Master Naveb," Takoda suggested, heading toward the door. "He may have an idea of where we should start. I'll be right back." Then he disappeared into the shadow of the hallway.

"So what do we do while we wait? Just start going through all these books?" Xanthe pulled a random book from the shelf and flipped to a page in the center. "Looking for what?"

"Anything. Something." Abeke opened a book on ancient Niloan homes. "Maybe someone else wrote about Tembo's visit and where he went. We can't give up."

"No one is quitting," Rollan reiterated from the other side of the room. "There's an answer here ... somewhere."

Conor meandered around the room. "I never said anything about *quitting*," he muttered. "It was only a suggestion."

Meilin held out her hand, and with a flash of light, Jhi appeared next to her. The large panda glanced around,

noticed that there was no danger in the room, and plopped down on her hind legs.

“Meilin!” Abeke exclaimed in a hushed voice. “We told Takoda we wouldn’t bring out our spirit animals. Don’t you think I want Uraza with me?”

“Uraza doesn’t help you see all sides of a problem like Jhi does,” Meilin countered, stroking the side of the panda’s large neck where the white fur met the black. “Plus, we’re the only ones in here.” Meilin leaned closer and whispered something to Jhi.

Jhi nodded and closed her eyes as Meilin did the same.

Conor thought of Briggan. He wanted to run his hand over the wolf’s silver back and feel the energy that always seemed to fill him up when they were together. Briggan understood him like no one else. Sometimes it felt as if the two of them shared a more personal bond than any of the other Greencloaks did with their spirit animals. It was as if they were both cut from the same cloth. Twin souls.

But now wasn’t the time to have him there. It was time for Conor to focus on what he could for the mission. If only he had some control over his visions. He stared at Tembo’s journal, still open on the desk, willing himself into a trance. No vision came to him, but from where he stood he did notice that some of the letters in the journal seemed to be off-center.

Conor approached the desk slowly, cocked his head to the side, and squinted his eyes. He studied the words carefully. The *W* was definitely written differently than the other block letters. It was in the calligraphy-like style found in the rest of the journal.

“Um, everyone. I think you need to come over here.” His eyes stayed on the page, as if shifting them away might make it all disappear.

“Do we have to?” Rollan had sat down in a corner with a stack of books on either side of him. “Can’t you just tell us

what you're thinking?"

"It's about Tembo and what he wrote." Conor held up the book. He may not have been the strongest reader in the group, but he knew that the words he saw weren't the same ones Meilin had read. A smile crept over Conor's face. The poor shepherd boy had figured it out all on his own. "I think I found our next clue ... and it was right here all along. Written in plain sight."



5

## SAND SCROLL

**“W**HAT DO YOU MEAN IT WAS RIGHT THERE?” ROLLAN asked, slowly getting up from the floor. It was late and he didn’t want to play games. “We all saw what was in the book. Tembo said he hid it somewhere that no one could find.”

“Not quite.” Conor set the book back down on the desk and put his fingertip on one of the last words written at the bottom of the page. “Look carefully at the letters.”

Rollan and the others gathered around Conor and stared at the book. Rollan didn’t understand what was supposed to be happening. The words hadn’t changed.

**the key to finding Stormspeaker is nowhere to be found.**

“Conor, we’re all tired.” Rollan rubbed his right eye. “Can you just tell us what you’re thinking?”

“The *w* in *nowhere*. Look. Don’t you see it?” Conor pointed to the letter as Abeke stared at the book. “The way it’s written, it could be part of the word or there could be a little space after it.”

“So?” Xanthe tucked a lock of her white hair behind her ear as she squeezed by Jhi to get a better look. “How does that—”

“That changes everything!” Abeke exclaimed, throwing her arms around Conor in a big bear hug. “You’re a genius!”

Rollan shook his head. Maybe he was too tired after a long day of trekking through Nilo and climbing up to the monastery, but he still didn’t understand what they were talking about. Usually by this point he could rely on Meilin to say something that would bring it all into focus, but she’d become quiet and pensive. Rollan knew this was Jhi’s influence, allowing her to study a situation from different perspectives, but it was still unnerving to him. He liked Meilin’s normal take-no-prisoners attitude.

“Look.” Conor motioned for Rollan to get closer. “If you read *nowhere* as two separate words”—he placed his finger under the word—it says that the key to finding Stormspeaker is *now here* to be found.” He let out a little sigh. “But ‘here’ is a pretty big place, and we still don’t know where to start looking.”

Meilin stood still, biting her bottom lip while staring at the journal. She had one hand buried in Jhi’s fur and the other just hung by her side.

“Meilin.” Xanthe said her name softly. “Are you okay?”

“Mm-hm,” Meilin muttered absentmindedly. Then she blinked, her mouth twitched, and the edges of her lips curled up.

Rollan could sense that the Meilin he knew was coming back. “Oh, she’s got something.” He felt the energy in the room shift. He loved that Meilin had that effect on people and situations.

“I knew it!” Takoda barged into the library. “I said not to bring out any of the Great Beasts and you did it anyway. Kovo is restless, and it’s because Jhi’s here.”

Abeke's face hardened. "His being bothered by having such a kind and peaceful soul as Jhi in the monastery says more about Kovo and his lack of growth than anything else could." She rolled back her shoulders. "We needed answers, and Jhi is the only Great Beast who could, *or would*, help."

Meilin rubbed Jhi's back. "Thank you, my friend," she whispered as she held out her arm. "I'll bring you out again soon." Jhi glanced at Takoda and dipped her head. In a flash of light she disappeared, once again becoming a tattoo on Meilin's hand.

"I don't mean to be rude.... It's just the way things have to be." Takoda seemed embarrassed. "I couldn't find Master Naveb and then Kovo started to—"

"Doesn't matter," Rollan interrupted. "Conor figured out that the clue is here, and I think Meilin knows something more." He held back a mischievous smile. "If her highness is ready to share it with the rest of us."

Meilin rolled her eyes. "All right..." She walked in front of the desk, then glanced back at Rollan. "You think you can keep up?" she teased.

Rollan laughed. "Oh, I can more than keep up. Just try me!"

In the light of the broken oil lamp, Rollan could see Meilin's cheeks turning pink with their little banter.

"So what is it?" Anka asked from somewhere in the room.

Meilin pointed to the page numbers on the bottom corner of each page. "Tembo wasn't only clever about using the words *now* and *here*.... He also put another clue for everyone to see." She pointed to the page number written on the last page. "This page should be 147, since the one before is 146, but it's numbered 159."

"So there are pages missing," Conor reasoned. "Someone tore them out."

Meilin shook her head. "No, nothing seems to be missing, and the five in 159 isn't how Tembo wrote his other number fives. It actually looks more like an *S*."

"One-S-nine?" Rollan was puzzled. "What does that mean?"

Meilin bit her lip. "That's what I don't know."

"One-S-nine," Takoda repeated. "One *Scroll* nine. That's how we catalog all our ancient scrolls. Library One, scroll number nine!"

"Tembo could have listed the location of Stormspeaker there!" Rollan put his hands on Takoda's shoulders and turned him around to face the door. "What are we waiting for? Let's go find it."

Takoda wiggled away. "Library One is our original library, where our most ancient records are kept. No one goes in there without permission from Master Naveb. No one."

"Seriously?" Meilin put her hands on her hips. "You're not going to help us get it?"

"I don't think that's what he meant." Xanthe stepped in. "Takoda has permission to go inside. He can get it and bring it back here for us." She glanced at Takoda and widened her eyes. "Right? Isn't *that* what you meant?"

Takoda didn't say anything, and Rollan certainly didn't like the idea. "But what if there are other clues over there? Something Takoda might overlook. Stormspeaker itself might be hidden inside."

"I wouldn't miss anything," Takoda corrected. "If it's there, I'd see it."

"Exactly." Xanthe nodded. "So Takoda will take care of it. Isn't that so, Takoda?"

"It's not the way things are supposed to work, but ..." "

Xanthe placed her hand on Takoda's arm and he grew quiet. "Then it's settled!" Xanthe said brightly.

Takoda looked down at Xanthe's hand still on his arm. He smiled and nodded.

"The window!" Xanthe abruptly shouted, pointing to the far side of the room.

Everyone turned to look as Xanthe darted toward it.

"What is it?" Anka asked, already by the window.

"A pair of eyes," Xanthe muttered, staring into the dark night. "I think it was a bird peering in, because it took off when I pointed."

Xanthe thrust open the window and looked out. The night breeze slipped into the room, causing the flame of the oil lamp to flicker.

"At this time of night, maybe it was an owl?" Takoda suggested. "Though I've never seen one up here."

A shriek in the distance echoed through the room.

Rollan knew exactly who made that noise.

Essix.

"I think I know who that was." Rollan smiled. "My faithful companion didn't want to come in. She's just letting us know she's nearby."

"But isn't Essix really big?" Xanthe leaned a little farther out the window, still scanning the sky. "I don't think this bird was that large."

"It's really dark and you were pretty far away.... How could you tell?" Anka asked.

"Being from Sadre, where there's no sunlight, I can usually see better at night. But maybe I was wrong." Xanthe let out a deep sigh. "My eyesight has changed since I've been aboveground ... one of the negatives of being here, I guess."

Takoda walked over to Xanthe. "You still have the best nighttime vision of anyone I know," he said softly. "We'll visit Phos Astos soon, and then I'll be the one who can't see too well." He leaned over the windowsill and pulled the window closed. "So let's keep this closed, in case Essix changes her mind." Takoda smiled and glanced over at the

Greencloaks. "At least while I go to Library One and get the scroll for all of us to read."



Rollan wasn't sure where Library One was located, but it couldn't have been too far, because Takoda returned within minutes, a little out of breath. In one hand he held a large rolled-up scroll, and in the other was an oil lantern.

"Here it is," Takoda said, hanging up the lantern. "I don't think anyone has read this in a very long time." He blew off a large layer of dust as Rollan helped unfurl the scroll over the desk.

"It's an academic study of the desert sands," Xanthe said, standing on the other side of Takoda. "Different types of minerals, how they shift with the wind, what plants grow best in each sand. Does this help you at all?"

Rollan didn't respond. He had made sure to stand next to Takoda so he wouldn't be the last one to figure out the clue this time. He wanted to prove to everyone, especially Meilin, that he had more than just street smarts.

They spent close to an hour reading through the scroll. Rollan's eyes felt as if they were beginning to cross, and the words were swimming around on the paper. He wasn't any closer to finding Stormspeaker.

"I've lived around deserts all my life—" Abeke yawned, interrupting herself. "And I never thought someone could write this much about ... *sand*."

"Why not?" Rollan touched the Heart of the Land, the amber stone hanging on a chain under his shirt. He knew that sand, like dirt, could shape a continent. "It's a powerful part of the earth."

Abeke rolled her eyes. "You think I don't know that?" She shook her head. "Don't forget, *I'm* the one from Nilo. I've seen sand carried in a windstorm causing the sun to be blocked out and turning the day into night. It's overtaken

whole villages, covering everything. You probably haven't seen anything like that in Amaya."

Conor raised both his hands to put a stop to the bickering. "Listen, we're all tired and there doesn't seem to be anything here. Maybe if we go to sleep and look at it again in the morning light, we'll figure something out."

Rollan thought back to Tembo's note. There was something written about a light. "Where's the journal?" Rollan lifted up the scroll and placed the book on top. He went to where the final note was written. He read over it again.

**In light of what is written, the orb carries on to no one, and the key to finding Stormspeaker is nowhere to be found.**

"Could it be?" Rollan muttered, picking up the scroll and carrying it over to where the lantern hung on the wall.

"What are you doing?" Meilin asked, following him.

"I have an idea." Rollan raised the parchment paper up to the light. "Tembo said 'in light of what is written.' Maybe he meant you needed *light* in order to see the key to finding Stormspeaker and the orb." He slowly moved the scroll across the glass of the lantern, letting the light shine through.

"There!" Anka exclaimed, showing herself to be standing next to Meilin. "There's something written on the edge!"

Rollan moved the corner of the parchment paper in front of the lantern's glass. The light from the flame revealed a previously invisible message written in the same calligraphy style as Tembo's journal. It said:

**To unify all, a valiant soul must seek the face in the mountain by passing through the valley of death where skulls fill the fields in the shadow of winter, then drain**

**the demon's blood and walk through the clouds to arrive at the edge of the land. For when this is done the queen's glory shall be revealed.**

"Valley of death? Demon's blood? Edge of the land?" Rollan grimaced. He didn't like any of it. "That doesn't sound good."

"But the face in the mountain ..." Takoda smiled. "I think I can help you with that part." He looked at Xanthe. "Remember how Sodu kept talking about seeing a face in the mountain when he came back from the spiritual journey Naveb sent him on? He thought that it was a sign of his manhood."

"He saw a mountain spirit?" Meilin asked.

Xanthe chuckled. "No, not a spirit ... just a rock formation in one of the mountains that's a few days east of here."

"But no one's mentioned a place called the valley of death," Takoda said. "Or a field full of skulls. Then again, this was written a long time ago. Things could have changed."

"We can go to that mountain and maybe find the valley along the way." Abeke yawned again, causing a ripple effect with everyone in the room. "We'll head out in the morning. Let our brains work on it while we sleep."

Takoda nodded as a faint tapping sound reverberated in the distance. "I'll find you some soft beds for the night."

"That's perfect." Meilin stretched her arms. "We haven't had a comfortable night's sleep in a while."

The *tap-tap-tap* noise was getting closer. Through his sluggishness, Rollan recognized what it was. "I think Master Naveb is about to pay us another visit." He rolled up the scroll and handed it back to Takoda. "Think it's

better if you're holding this when he gets here. I don't need to be scolded again."

Conor walked to the door and opened it for the old monk. The now rapid beat of the cane hitting the stone floor echoed through the hallway. "We can ask him about the—"

Conor was cut off by the old monk storming into the library. Master Naveb's brows were furrowed and his cheeks were flushed from walking so quickly.

"You must all leave at once!" Master Naveb announced. "The Oathbound are on their way!"



6

## BIRD THIEF

**A**LL TRACE OF THE EXHAUSTION THAT HAD BEEN tugging at Conor's limbs evaporated with the announcement that the Oathbound had found them once again. It seemed that no matter what they did or where they went, the Oathbound somehow anticipated their every move. The Greencloaks were placing everyone they encountered in jeopardy.

"Are you sure they're coming here?" Rollan asked. "No one knew where we were going. We didn't even know that we'd end up here!"

Master Naveb nodded. "They may not have known before, but Sodu is making sure they know now."

"He betrayed us?" Conor couldn't believe it. There were traitors around every corner.

"Sodu?" Takoda repeated, his face still registering the shock of it. "It can't be." He shook his head in denial. "No, he might not have agreed with having the Greencloaks here, but I can't believe he would betray this place. He truly believes in it."

"Perhaps I was too rough with him. Backed him into a corner." Master Naveb sighed. "Regardless of the reason,

he tried to enlist a few in the monastery to go with him into town. He thinks he can strike a deal with the Oathbound. The five of you in exchange for an assurance that the monastery will be left intact.”

“The Oathbound will never honor any agreement.” Rollan began pacing around the room. “We need to leave right away.”

“How much time do we have?” Meilin asked.

“Five, maybe six hours.” Master Naveb motioned for two young monks to come into the library. They each held several bags and placed them on the floor by the window. “One of the sentries said they left about two hours ago.” Master Naveb pointed to the bags. “I brought you some supplies, along with a map to help you on your journey. Don’t tell any of us where you are headed. Just go ... and be careful.”

“We’ll help guide them.” Xanthe knelt down and opened one of the bags. “Thank you, Master Naveb ... for everything.”

Takoda grabbed Xanthe by the arm. “We can’t go,” he whispered. “I can’t leave Kovo here in his condition, and he won’t go into passive state.”

“Then you stay,” she answered. “I’m helping our friends. I’m a Sadrean warrior, not a librarian. I’ll be more helpful outside. I know this area, and you said it yourself: No one sees better at night than me.”

“Xanthe, please ...” Takoda’s eyes pleaded with her. He was caught choosing between his spirit animal and someone who was obviously special to him.

“We can go on our own,” Abeke said, already slinging one of the bags over her shoulder. “We’ve done it before. Nilo is home for me. We don’t need the extra help.”

Xanthe ignored both Abeke and Takoda. “Master Naveb, did you bring my special cloak, the one I use during daylight?”

The old monk nodded. "It's over there." He pointed to a bag closest to the window. "I suspected you might want to go with them."

Xanthe hustled over to the bag, her pale skin reflecting the moonlight that streamed through the window. She slipped on a sand-colored cloak and looked at the Greencloaks. "Ready?"

"Xanthe, you don't have to do this." Conor knew how much she'd given up during the battle with the Wyrm. She was once again abandoning her home and the people she cared about. "Abeke is an amazing tracker and guide."

"No disrespect is meant by this." Xanthe's eyes met Abeke's. "But I'm your best bet to get out of here. You don't know this area like I do." She picked up one of the bags and tossed it to Meilin. "We can each contribute something to the mission."

"She has a point." Meilin flipped the bag over her shoulder. "We could definitely use her help. She's a strong fighter, too."

Xanthe looked back at Takoda. "I understand why you need to stay, but you can still help them by finding more information on the Dragon's Eye. There has to be another clue in the message." Xanthe leaned closer to Takoda and, in front of everyone, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'll come back. Promise."

Takoda didn't say anything else. Conor wasn't sure if his silence was from the kiss or from knowing that there wasn't any point in discussing it further. The matter had been settled. Xanthe was going with them.



The group left the monastery the same way they'd arrived: down the rope ladders and through the fissure, until they came to the Taabara Chasm. Once there, they called out

Briggan and Uraza to help guard against any Oathbound attack.

For the next few hours, Xanthe led them over several rocky hills until the ground evened out and became flat. By the light of the small lanterns they carried, Conor could tell that they had entered a large savannah. According to Naveb's map, they were now just west of the mountains where Sodu had his spiritual journey and where he had described seeing the face in the mountain. If they continued at their current pace, they'd probably be there in two or three days' time.

As the group approached a small acacia tree, Anka stopped walking and leaned against its trunk. "I don't know about all of you, but I'm exhausted. I think we should make camp for a few hours. Try to get some rest."

Conor reached down and stroked Briggan, who was leaning against his leg. "I agree. It'll be daybreak in a few hours, and the sun will drain us even more. We need to be alert."

Xanthe looked around, her pink eyes searching the surroundings. "I don't see any other trees in the distance, so this is probably as good a place as any."

"Agreed." Abeke dropped her bag and sat on the savannah's grass. Uraza circled her twice before deciding on a spot next to Abeke. The leopard let her long tail curl around Abeke's ankle, but the tension in her muscles showed she was not there to relax. Her ears twitched and her eyes scanned the tall grass that surrounded them. Uraza was in full hunting mode, ready to protect the group.

Conor plopped exhaustedly to the ground. His eyes were heavy and he had a hard time keeping them open. He rested his head against Briggan, knowing that the wolf would stay vigilant with Uraza.

"Maybe Xanthe should keep watch while we sleep," Anka suggested, her voice penetrating the darkness even if her form didn't. "She can see better than the rest of us."

“Of course.” Xanthe nodded, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the group. “I’ll make sure to wake you if I notice anything.”

Meilin held out her hand and, in a brief flash, Jhi appeared. The large panda promptly curled up on the ground, squashing the tall grass around her. Meilin settled in next to her. “I won’t need much time to get reenergized,” she said, stifling a yawn. “Jhi helps me relax more than I could ever imagine. I’ll be ready for a full day with just a couple of hours. I can switch with Xanthe at that point.”

Rollan took out a piece of fruit that Naveb had packed and sat down, leaning against the tree trunk. A bird called out from somewhere in the tree.

“That sounded like a macaw,” Rollan said, lifting his head to search the limbs for the bright blue feathers and yellow beak.

“Caw!” The bird repeated its call.

Rollan put the piece of fruit on top of his bag and stood up, peering into the moonlight.

A flutter of wings beat past him and snagged the piece of fruit before flying back to its perch in the tree. The thief was a fork-tailed, glossy black bird.

“Hey!” Rollan shook the tree. “That was mine!”

The bird responded by pooping right on Rollan’s bag.

Everyone—except Rollan—burst into laughter.

“You just got fooled by a drongo,” Abeke said, still laughing. “They’re notorious for mimicking other birds in order to steal food. But it’s a good thing it’s here. They’re also great at warning when a predator approaches.”

“Yeah, well ...” Rollan moved his bag from beneath the drongo’s reach and cleaned off the top with a small rock. “Helpful or not, I’m going to have drongo stew if it drops any other presents on my stuff during the night.”

“Why don’t you curl up over there with Jhi?” Conor suggested. “I don’t think Essix is much of a cuddler, and we all need some rest.”

Rollan glanced over at Jhi's black-and-white form next to Meilin. "Think Jhi would be okay if I used her as a big pillow?" Rollan asked Meilin.

"Hrrgmmfani," Meilin muttered, already half-asleep.

"I'll take that as a yes." Rollan curled up against the panda and she gave him a big lick on the head. "Panda slobber isn't necessary, Jhi. I'm tired, not hurt."

Through half-closed eyes, Conor watched as Jhi gave Rollan another lick ... just for good measure.



It was dawn when a shrill, metallic shriek sounded from the tree.

Briggan growled, low and guttural, and Conor immediately sat up, his sleepiness falling away like a heavy cloak.

A few feet away, Abeke was already kneeling and pulling out her bow. Uraza crouched, somewhat hidden in the tall grass, looking ready to pounce.

"Something's out there," Xanthe whispered, staring at the savannah. "But it's hidden in the grass."

Meilin was squatting, her sword in one hand, as she called Jhi back into passive state. The disappearance of the panda caused Rollan to fall back with a start.

"Hey! What's the big ..." He glanced at everyone and quickly pulled out his dagger, taking a defensive posture. "Is it the Oathbound? Are they out there?"

"Not sure," Abeke answered. The group stayed low, putting their backs together in a tight circle formation, with an eye out in every direction. Uraza and Briggan both had their hackles raised.

Conor slowly pulled out his ax. He glanced over at Briggan, who stood stiff-legged, eyes focused on something in the distance.

Someone was definitely out there.

The drongo gave another shrill cry and flew away.

"Anka, are you up for this?" Meilin slowly moved her sword around in the air as Abeke nocked an arrow onto her bowstring.

"Seriously?" Anka said, clearly annoyed at the insinuation. "I'm a pretty decent fighter, Meilin.... You should know that." Anka's cloak and dark hair flickered into view as she revealed her position next to Xanthe. She was holding her quarterstaff as Toey, her spirit animal, scampered into her boot. Then just as quickly, she blended back into her surroundings. "You've been training me, and by now I may even know all your tricks."

"Yeah, yeah, let's not get too cocky." Meilin continued staring out into the savannah, her expression focused.

Laughter rang out across the savannah. It was coming from somewhere to the east of them.

Then more laughter.

A chorus from all sides.

Whoever was out there seemed to find the entire situation very funny.

"Seriously? The Oathbound think this is a joke?" Rollan rolled back his shoulders, getting ready for the fight. "I'll show them something that's not too funny."

"No." Abeke's fingers twitched as she steadied her bow. "I recognize that sound. It's not the Oathbound."

"Who is it, then?" Conor asked, tightening his grip on his ax. "Are they dangerous?"

"Hyenas." Abeke's eyes narrowed as Uraza snarled at something in the tall grass in front of her. "And when they're in a pack, they're more than dangerous ... they're absolutely deadly."



## BATTLEGROUND

**A**BEKE COULD SENSE THE HYENAS CREEPING CLOSER through the savannah. She opened her stance, raised her right elbow, and pulled the bow's string as far back as possible to get maximum power. In that instant, Abeke became one with her surroundings. Her friends' restlessness fell away as she focused on her own breathing and heartbeat. Uraza was augmenting her hunting instincts. Abeke could smell the predators' scent in the air, feel the wind glide by her cheek, and see the slight shifts in the blades of tall grass. Her fingertips relaxed, putting enough pressure on the arrow to keep it in place until the moment demanded its release.

She waited patiently. She was no longer the hunted, but the hunter.

*Thwack!*

Abeke released the arrow as she caught sight of a hyena lunging toward them. "Here they come!" she yelled to her friends, knowing she'd just hit her first mark.

Uraza leaped forward, claws out and teeth bared. She grabbed one of the hyenas by the neck and flipped it over,

just as two more jumped on top of her. Abeke aimed at one of the hyenas, but couldn't shoot for fear of hitting Uraza.

The leopard rolled on the ground, shaking off the doglike creatures, but not before one of them sank its teeth into her hide. Uraza roared, infuriated at being bitten, and gave chase to her attacker through the grassland.

Abeke turned her attention to Rollan and Xanthe, who had teamed up to battle against a group of smaller but persistent hyenas. They were pushing that group back toward the east. On the other side, Briggan was already in pursuit of a pack that had charged all at once. He chased them through the tall grass, losing sight of one for a moment before catching a glimpse of another and taking off in its direction.

Meanwhile, several hundred yards away, Meilin and Conor were fighting at close range against two of the larger animals. They had been forced away from the campsite, but Meilin had the upper hand, using her sword to jab and slash at the persistent hyena. Conor had taken a defensive stance behind her, wielding his ax in one hand and a knife in the other.

"Keep it up!" Meilin shouted. "We've got them on the run."

The hyenas were spreading out and seemed to be disbanding, but Abeke sensed that something was wrong. Why would these highly intelligent hunters attack a group of humans and large predators? And though the hyenas had worked together, the Greencloaks had pushed most of them back relatively easily. Abeke spun around.

That's when she saw it ... the real plan.

These animals were doing what they always did. A coordinated attack to get what they truly wanted ... an easy target. Separate what they viewed as the weakest member of the herd. The large-scale attack had been a distraction to split the group into different corners, leaving the campsite with only Anka protecting their bags and food.

Anka.

Even though she was older than all of them, she would be seen as the slightest in the group. If the hyenas had spotted her at some point while the Greencloaks were sleeping, she could have become the hyenas' target.

"It's Anka!" Abeke yelled. "They're after her!" Abeke rushed back toward the tree with the other Greencloaks.

As if on cue, six snarling hyenas jumped out from the tall grass, and in the moonlight Abeke could see them surrounding Anka. Anka spun around to face each one. The colors of her clothes and skin rippled as she blended into her surroundings and disappeared from view. The hyenas paused, confused because they could still smell her. The grass shifted and Anka reappeared a few feet away. One of the hyenas was done playing cat and mouse and lunged forward.

Abeke shot an arrow straight into its neck, dropping it on the spot.

"Having a hard time believing your eyes?" Anka taunted the remaining five animals. She twirled her quarterstaff and kicked up some dust, her cloak rippling and changing colors as she faded out of sight. The hyenas drew closer. Then one yelped as she hit it hard enough that it went flying through the air. "How'd you like that?" Anka shouted, already standing somewhere else, while another hyena whimpered in agony.

The Greencloaks watched in amazement. Anka was anything but the weakest of the group.

"Don't stand there staring!" Anka called out. "Get the rest of them!"

Meilin ran forward with her sword held high above her head while Abeke unleashed an arrow that grazed the side of a hyena. Conor, Rollan, and Xanthe charged in to help, but there was already a whooping call in the distance. The hyenas turned and retreated back into the grasslands.

"That was amazing," Conor remarked as they all regrouped at the campsite. "I didn't know you could fight like that."

"You handled them like a pro," Abeke added while pulling out her arrow from the dead hyena.

"Meilin is a good teacher," Anka said, calling Toey into passive state on her arm. Instantly her features looked crisper. Once the natural camouflage tendencies that Toey imparted were removed, Abeke could see the glimmer in Anka's eyes as she smiled. Abeke could sense that Anka was proud of herself. "Not sure how I would've done against the Oathbound, but hyenas were good for my first real one-on-one challenge."

"You've definitely come a long way." Meilin picked up her bag and slung it over her shoulder. Uraza and Briggan were nearby, each resting next to a fallen hyena that they'd brought over. "Guess we can all eat hyena meat for our next meal."

Rollan rubbed his belly. "Yum. Well, it beats them eating some Greencloak meat for *their* next meal." He smiled. "Don't think they'd like it anyway. We're way too tough to chew."

Abeke chuckled. Rollan always had a way of lightening the mood.

Suddenly, Essix screeched and circled high above them.

"Look who finally shows up ... after the fight is over," Rollan said, lifting up his arm in case the gyrfalcon wanted to perch there.

Essix dove straight toward Rollan, twisting only at the last moment to avoid colliding with him. Abeke had to duck to escape getting pummeled.

"Hey!" Abeke glanced up at the falcon, who was swooping down once more. "He was only kidding."

Rollan frowned, his eyes trained on the majestic bird. He looked worried.

“Something’s wrong.” Rollan sat down on the lush grass. “Essix needs to show me something.” He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths before settling into a quiet rhythm.

Xanthe pulled the map out from under her cloak. “We have to go that way ... toward those mountains.” She pointed east. “But did you see who else headed that way?”

“The hyenas,” Meilin and Conor answered in unison.

Abeke nodded. “They’ll be tracking us. Waiting for us to drop our guard.”

Rollan swayed a bit and mumbled something.

Meilin bent down next to him. “What do you see?”

Rollan didn’t answer at first, but then he popped his eyes open. “Oathbound. Still pretty far, but headed this way.” He stood up and pointed to the west. “Coming from that direction. I counted seven of them on camels.”

“So let’s go.” Xanthe buttoned her hooded cloak, making sure she was fully covered from head to toe.

“And one of them has a grizzly bear as a spirit animal,” Rollan added. “It was helping them track us.”

“Ugh, that’s really not good news.” Conor grimaced. “Grizzlies have one of the best senses of smell. We have to do something to shake them off our scent.”

Abeke turned to look at the remnants of their campsite. Squashed grass, dead hyenas, blood on the ground ... anyone would know they’d been there. “Hold on,” Abeke said. “Let’s not go too fast.”

“You sense something?” Conor asked as he gazed at Briggan. The wolf looked content to bathe in the warm sun that was rising in the east. “Briggan and Uraza seem okay.”

Abeke thought about what Master Naveb had told her. A good hunter doesn’t always lunge forward, but takes in what is around and behind them. They could turn this into an advantage to throw off the trackers.

“What if the hyenas had won?” Abeke mused out loud. “If they had killed us while we slept?”

“What are you saying?” Xanthe shifted her weight from one foot to another. “Are you worried that the hyenas will get us next time? Because they won’t.”

“No, I’m wondering if we can get the Oathbound to think that, though.”

“Oh ...” Meilin gave a slow nod. “Fake our deaths.”

“Or have them think at least a couple of us died here.” Conor walked around to one of the dead hyenas. “We can bloody up a couple of our cloaks and leave them here. Make it seem like the hyenas carried some of us off. Maybe they’ll think we separated and there was only a small group here. Then they might go back to report what they found and start a new search.”

“But won’t the bear just pick up our trail when we continue across the savannah toward the mountains?” Xanthe watched as Conor ripped his bag with the corner of his ax and tossed it aside.

“Not necessarily.” Abeke glanced at Rollan. “Especially if we aren’t going *over* the savannah.”

Rollan nodded with a smile. “That’s where I come in.” He pulled out the chain around his neck where the Heart of the Land hung. “We won’t leave a trail over the savannah because we’ll be going under it.” He gave Xanthe a wink. “It’ll be like going home for you.”

“What? I don’t understand.” Xanthe watched as Rollan walked to a patch of barren, sandy dirt next to Abeke. He clutched the gila monster amulet in his fist and punched the ground.

Abeke jumped aside. She felt a small tremor, then a more powerful one, as the earth opened up right next to her, forming a sinkhole. Down at the bottom there was an opening to what looked to be a tunnel.

“How?” Xanthe had a mixed expression of fear and amazement. “What ... what is that thing?” She pointed to the amulet in Rollan’s hand.

"A bond token," Rollan said, as if that were enough of an explanation. "It has a legendary gila monster's power to move the earth."

"You're getting pretty good at using it," Meilin whispered. "Impressive."

Abeke expected Rollan to dismiss the praise with a smart-mouthed comment, but he simply smiled and stayed quiet. Meilin definitely had a positive effect on him.

"Now that we have our way out ..." Conor pointed to his ripped cloak lying on the ground. "Who else wants to give up their cloak and pretend to have been eaten alive?"

Abeke knew that there was no way Rollan would relinquish Tarik's green cloak. It meant too much to him. The rest of them were wearing the nondescript cloaks they'd picked up in Eura, so it made sense for one of them to leave theirs behind.

"I'll do it." Abeke began untying the cord around her neck. "This slows me down anyway."

"No." Xanthe put a hand on Abeke's arm. "For the plan to work, it has to be me. There's no other choice."

"That's ridiculous!" Meilin exclaimed. "You're the only one who can't give up her cloak. You need to have a special covering to protect you from the sun."

Xanthe shook her head. "If the trackers came from the monastery, Sodu could have given them something from my room to track my scent. It has to be my cloak."

Essix squawked as he flew in circles above them once again.

"We don't have much time." Rollan gave Essix a signal, letting her know that he understood the message. "What Xanthe said makes sense. Plus, we'll stay underground for most of the day. She should be fine."

"I'll give her my cloak when we move aboveground," Abeke said. "That'll help a little."

"Scatter whatever's in my bag around the campsite and let's go!" Xanthe tossed her cloak to Conor and jumped into

the sinkhole, disappearing into the tunnel opening.

"I think it's a good plan," Abeke said, pulling Uraza back into passive state. "Then again, it's our only plan, so ... "

"Um, this tunnel ends after a few feet," Xanthe shouted from down below.

Rollan peered into the sinkhole. "Yeah, I can't move that much earth at once. When we're all down there, I'll keep pushing the dirt out of the way and close it in behind us."

"Bring my lantern!" Xanthe reminded him. "You'll need it down here."

"Already got it." Rollan tapped the small lantern he'd secured to the outside of his bag. "I'll toss our bags down first."

"And I'll catch them," Anka replied from the bottom of the pit. Her skin had already shifted to mimic the coloring of the shadowy hole ... which meant Toey was back.

"When ... how did you ... ?" Rollan shrugged off his own question. "Careful, this one is heavy," he said to Anka as he tossed the first of the bags.

"What do you think?" Conor held up Xanthe's blood-spattered cloak to Abeke and Meilin. It had a large rip from where Briggan had torn into it. Conor had already staged the campsite as if there had been an epic battle, with two of the hyenas left behind as casualties, and a few items from their bags thrown around.

Meilin surveyed the area. "Looks pretty convincing," she said. She'd covered up most of their footprints in the dirt. Now it really seemed as if only two people had been at the campsite.

"Yeah, I think so too." Conor held out his arm. "Briggan, you'll probably appreciate not being in that cramped tunnel for hours." The gray wolf leaped toward Conor, disappearing in a flash and reappearing as the tattoo below his elbow.

Essix had flown back and perched herself on Rollan's shoulder. "How about it, Essix? You won't be able to track

us while we're underground. Going into passive state would be—" A flash of light indicated that the gyrfalcon didn't need any more convincing.

"Guess she agreed with you," Conor said, walking to the edge of the sinkhole. "Now, let's go find that valley."

"Um, yeah, I was going to say something about that." Abeke surveyed the mountains in the distance one last time as she stood next to Rollan and Conor. "We're supposed to go to a valley of death and find a field filled with skulls ... but have we stopped to think that those skulls might be from people entering the valley of death?"

"Oh, I've thought about it." Rollan sighed. "Just don't *like* thinking about it too much, if you know what I mean."

Conor shrugged. "It's not like we have much of a choice. We have to go wherever Tembo took Stormspeaker."

"True, but ..." Meilin tossed her bag into the sinkhole and looked at the three other Greencloaks. "We have to be careful. Hyenas and the Oathbound may be the least of our troubles."

For a moment none of the Greencloaks said a word, breathing in the last bit of fresh air they'd have for a while. Then the four of them leaped into the shadowy pit.



## UNDERGROUND TOUR

THE GLOW FROM THE LANTERN BOUNCED OFF THE earthen walls as Rollan continued pushing aside the ground, creating a tunnel ahead of the group and allowing it to collapse once the last person was through. They'd been crawling on their hands and knees in single file, to minimize the amount of earth Rollan had to move, but it still took considerable effort and concentration. At one point, they considered taking turns using the bond token, but though it could be used by anyone, no one knew how to use it as well as Rollan. The risk of having the tunnel collapse on top of them was too great.

It had been about six or seven hours since they'd left the campsite, or at least that's what Meilin figured, based on the growling of her stomach. Xanthe had been able to keep them headed east, using her strange ability to navigate while underground by sensing Erdas's magnetic fields.

"I think I need a break," Rollan announced, wiping his brow and rolling onto his back. "And I'm pretty sure I've heard everyone's stomach rumble in the last few minutes."

"Should we go up and eat?" Conor asked from the rear spot in the line. "The air is becoming stagnant."

"I don't think we've gone far enough to take a chance," Abeke answered from just ahead of him. "Plus, the sun will be high in the sky, which won't help Xanthe."

"I can always stay while you go up," Xanthe offered. She'd been crawling behind Rollan while directing him where to go. "But if we're all taking a break down here, then I have an idea." She reached up and touched the hard dirt above her head. "This doesn't feel as sandy as where we were. Maybe Rollan can create an airhole. In Sadre we had them in our tunnels to help the air circulate."

Meilin peered around Xanthe to get a better look at Rollan. "What do you think? Can you do that?"

Rollan propped himself up on his elbows. "Yeah, and if we're going to be here for more than just a couple of minutes, then I think I can make this area bigger. Just give me a little space."

Meilin almost laughed at his request. Space was not something they could give. But she scooted back, bumping into Anka.

Rollan clasped the amber stone in his right hand and closed his eyes. He grimaced, as if lifting a heavy object. Tiny rocks started to rain down as the ground above them buckled and lifted. It wasn't much, maybe a few feet, but it was enough.

"You did it!" Meilin sat up, happy to be vertical once again.

Rollan took a deep breath and grunted as a crack above his head widened and burst at the surface. A ray of sunlight streamed in, highlighting the dirt floor next to Rollan.

"Whew!" He collapsed onto his back with a smile on his face. "That wasn't as easy as I thought it'd be, but you guys can call me Mr. Superstrong from now on."

"How about we not?" Abeke said, rummaging through her bag. "And instead we offer you some water, dried fruit,

and jerky?"

Rollan scooted against the side of the small cavern he had created. "Fair enough. Although you have to admit, I did a pretty good job of making this place."

"Yes, you and the Heart of the Land," Conor said as Abeke passed around the food.

"But more the Heart of the Land than you," Meilin corrected. "Don't go getting a big head."

"Who, me?" Rollan acted shocked. "Never!"

They were all sitting in a circle. The cavern seemed to glow with the light from the lantern and the beam of sunlight streaming down from above. Meilin felt calm. She was with people she trusted, friends who had her back. She realized that she was relaxed because she felt safe, even as they headed toward a so-called valley of death. Everyone here would fight to the death for the others.

Xanthe stretched her arms out in front of her. "So this crown you're looking for, Stormspeaker, does it do stuff like the Heart of the Land?" she asked.

Meilin bit her lip. After everything they'd been through in Sadre, battling against the Wyrm, she trusted Xanthe. But the girl wasn't a Greencloak. She was the only one in their group who wasn't, and it didn't seem right to discuss their mission with her. Doubt crept into Meilin's thoughts. Perhaps she shouldn't be so quick to feel safe. There had been betrayals before.

The quiet lasted too long. No one had answered Xanthe, and their silence spoke volumes.

"Guess I'm not worthy of knowing those secrets," Xanthe mumbled.

*Worthy.*

Meilin thought back to Worthy, and how even though he had been a Redcloak and a one-time enemy, he'd sacrificed himself for their mission. She exchanged glances with Conor, Abeke, and Rollan, but couldn't seem to find Anka in

the cavern. They were all thinking the same thing. Conor nodded, as did Abeke. Rollan shrugged noncommittally.

"It does have some type of power," Meilin explained. "We just don't know what it is exactly. There are four bond tokens: the Heart of the Land, which we found in Amaya. You've seen what it does...."

"The Wildcat's Claw," Abeke continued. "A sword that can cut through anything and shoots out fire. But we lost it during a cave-in while we were in Eura."

"We didn't just lose it," Conor said. "We also lost our friend Worthy, who sacrificed himself to help us escape."

"Oh, that's why ..." Xanthe nodded with new understanding. "I get it. When I mentioned not being worthy ... that's why you all looked at each other."

"Yes," Meilin said. "But the truth is we don't know what to expect from the remaining two bond tokens. Stormspeaker and the Dragon's Eye are still mysteries to us. We know they're probably very powerful; a bond token in the wrong hands would be a disaster. And even creating them is dangerous, as it can rip apart a spirit animal bond. The Greencloaks hid them for a reason."

"All right, but something still puzzles me," Xanthe said. "You think finding these bond tokens will somehow clear the Greencloaks' name, but how? Won't people fear that you've become even more powerful? Isn't that what got the Greencloaks into trouble in the first place?"

"There are some things that only a Greencloak would understand, Xanthe." Anka's voice was soft but strong. "No offense, but we can't share everything with you."

The conversation ended on that point, but Meilin couldn't help wonder if what Xanthe had said was true. Olvan had sent them on this mission believing that it was the only way to save the Greencloaks, but what if he was wrong? What if this made matters worse?

After a few minutes of eating in silence, Rollan spoke up. "So how much more ground shifting do you guys think I

need to do before we get to the valley?"

Abeke looked at the map. "We're probably somewhere in this area," she said, running her finger over a wide swath of what looked like empty space. "Which means we have a few more hours to go before we reach the mountain range."

"It'll probably be dark once we're there." Conor leaned over to peer up at the small ray of sunlight coming in through the airhole. "We could start hiking over the mountains with less chance of being spotted."

"I can help guide you without even using the lantern," Xanthe said. "So I like the idea. But why not simply go under the mountains like we're doing now? Or is that something you think I shouldn't know either?"

Meilin didn't like Xanthe's tone. Sure, she had helped them before and was risking a lot now, but if it came at the price of causing division among the Greencloaks, then they would have to continue on without her. "Xanthe, if you can't accept not knowing a few things, then maybe—"

"Moving solid rock is much harder than shifting dirt and sand," Rollan said, cutting Meilin off. "Plus, in the middle of a mountain, it's not like we can go up thirty feet or so and be aboveground." He glanced at Xanthe and widened his eyes. "And having you guide us in the dark again will be very helpful ... especially since we have to go to that valley of death place."

"That reminds me of something I once heard ..." Abeke stared at the ground, where she was mindlessly making small swirls in the loose dirt with her forefinger. "What was it?"

"Something about the valley of death?" Conor rolled his head from side to side, trying to crack his neck. "Maybe you heard about it in your village?"

"Maybe," Abeke said, but she was lost in her own memories.

"Well, if Rollan's feeling rested"—Meilin put her canteen back in her bag—"then I think we should start moving again. We still have a ways to go."

"Better enter ... valley of death ... who can see," Abeke mumbled. She paused, then slapped her leg. "That's it!"

"Huh?" Rollan glanced over at her. "What did you say?"

"It's something the Rain Dancer in my village once said," Abeke explained. "It's an old Niloan proverb ... *Better to enter the valley of death with someone who can see, than blindly run through life never knowing who surrounds you.*"

"You think it has something to do with where we're going?" Meilin asked.

Abeke shrugged. "No idea."

Rollan pulled out the Heart of the Land, which hung under his shirt. "Sounds like it's a warning about not being alone."

"Really?" Conor took Rollan's bag and slipped it over his shoulder. "How do you figure?"

"Well, I think it's just saying that it's better to die with someone who knows the real you than go through life never letting anyone get close." Rollan paused. Everyone was staring at him with slightly surprised looks.

"What? I can't be deep? I've read poetry before, if that surprises you." Rollan gave a sheepish smile. "Or I could be completely wrong about the whole thing."

"What you said does make sense." Meilin was already on her hands and knees, ready to start crawling again. "Goes along with our belief that united Greencloaks are the best for Erdas."

"Xanthe, which way do we go?" Anka asked from behind Meilin.

"Open the tunnel that way." She pointed to a spot behind Rollan. "It'll keep us headed east."

The group continued crawling through Rollan's tunnel for several more hours, taking small breaks every once in a

while, until they bumped into a dead end where the compacted dirt changed to solid rock. At that point, Rollan took a deep breath and used the amulet to create a crack in the hard dirt above them, widening it to form a gaping hole.

Meilin, standing with the others, bent her head back and took in the starry sky. They were still about twenty feet down. "So, any suggestions on how to get up there?"

"Only one way," Abeke said. "Together. The lightest person climbs on top of the others and then drops a rope. Normally, that would be me, but now I think it's Anka." Abeke turned around, searching for the camouflaged Greencloak. "Don't you think, Anka? Anka? Anka, where are you?"

"I'm right here," she answered. "And yes, make a pyramid and I'll climb on top."

"Before we do anything, let me have Essix check the area," Rollan said as he released the gyrfalcon, who promptly took to the sky.

Meilin stared at Rollan. He had decided to squat down and was rubbing his temples. Under the layer of dirt that they all had covering them, his face looked flushed, and there was something about how his shoulders were drooping. "You're looking a little ... off."

Rollan shook out his arms. "I'm fine. It just feels like that one time when I binged on a bag of sugar candies and my body crashed afterward. Maybe wielding all that power for hours without stopping does something similar."

From high above, Essix squawked, giving the all clear to continue.

"That's our cue." Rollan took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "Let's do this. Conor and I can form the base." Rollan motioned for Conor to get closer. "Meilin and Xanthe can climb on top and Anka can scale all of us to get to the top."

"You sure you're okay?" Abeke asked.

"I'm a little tired ... but when has that stopped any of us?" Rollan replied with a grin.

"All right, then, if you're sure." Conor pulled out a rope from one of the bags and handed it to Anka. "Here you go."

Anka took the rope, looping it over her head and right shoulder. As soon as the rope touched her, it began to blend into the shadows thrown by the lantern. "I'm ready."

A few minutes later each of them had made their way out of the pit and were standing under the expansive night sky and full moon. They all stretched and filled their lungs with the cool air that drifted down the mountainside.

Loosening her long braid, Meilin shook out some of the dirt and pebbles stuck in her hair. It felt good after being confined underground all day, but what she really longed for was a bath. That was a luxury she rarely got to enjoy anymore. Not that she would ever trade her life as a Greencloak for her prior life in the palace. That lifestyle was best suited for other girls ... like Princess Song.

Meilin felt a slight pain in her chest. She hadn't thought of the princess in a while, but the two girls had much in common. Besides having grown up in Zhongese palaces, they'd both seen their fathers die violently. It was something Meilin could never forget, and she wouldn't wish it on anyone. And not only had she and Princess Song witnessed those horrendous deaths, they'd both been forced to take charge of circumstances not of their own choosing. Meilin wondered if, after everything was over and the Greencloaks cleared their name, she and Princess Song would become friends. It felt like a distinct possibility.

"Why don't we make camp here? Give Rollan a break for a while," Anka said. "We could use the pit as a trap if any animals try to attack again."

"I just need five minutes and I'll be good to go," Rollan said, having sat down and rested his head on his knees. "We have a lot of ground to cover."

Conor and Abeke took the opportunity of finally being aboveground to release their spirit animals. Briggan and Uraza quickly took in their surroundings. Uraza first scratched the ground, then her nostrils flared. She stood motionless, having picked up the scent of something. Briggan, on the other hand, took one look around, decided that there was nothing of interest for him, and sat down to watch Uraza.

The leopard took two slow steps forward, paused, perked her ears, and then darted toward the mountain. She was on the hunt.

Conor laughed as Briggan jumped up and gave chase. "Looks like Briggan doesn't want to be left out of whatever Uraza is up to."

"Rrrr ..." Rollan let out a quiet snore. He had passed out while sitting on the ground.

"Poor guy," Anka muttered. "He's really tired."

"He looks uncomfortable." Meilin sat across from him and began rebraiding her hair. "This should help." She called out Jhi, who, upon seeing how exhausted Rollan was, snuggled up against him and pulled him to her chest. Rollan didn't protest and simply sank into the bear.

Rollan's five minutes turned into twenty, then thirty.

Essix had returned and was perched on a nearby acacia tree, waiting for the group to continue.

"Why don't we split up for a while?" Abeke suggested. "Conor, Xanthe, and I can head up the mountain and find a place to make camp during daylight hours. A cave or something. That way Xanthe won't have to deal with the sun. Essix can show you where we are whenever Rollan recovers."

Meilin nodded, not wanting to risk waking Rollan up. She didn't like seeing him like this. It reminded her of when he became ill with the Sunset Death when they were fighting the Devourer. So much had happened since that time ... in the world and between her and Rollan.

"I think that's a good idea," Anka whispered. "We'll meet up with you in a few hours. Just make sure you don't go too far without us."

Conor nodded. He and the others picked up their bags to begin the hike up the mountain. Meilin watched them leave for as long as she was able to, until the darkness of the savannah swallowed her friends from sight.

She pulled the sides of her cloak tighter across her chest. There was a chill in the air. She felt fidgety not having anything to do, so she decided to take an inventory of everything in her bag. Suddenly, she felt Jhi's eyes on her.

"What?" she asked. The panda still had Rollan's head resting on top of her belly.

Jhi blinked but didn't move.

"I just don't like sitting around doing nothing," Meilin explained, repacking the medical supplies, fruit, jerky, and a small tin pot for cooking. "Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere without him. I know he needs to rest."

She sighed, leaning back on her elbows. They all needed to be at full strength if they were going to survive whatever waited for them in the valley of death.

"Anka?" Meilin listened carefully, trying to pinpoint her location. "Anka, you want to train a little more?"

"I think I'm done for the day," Anka replied, her voice coming from a few feet away. "It's too dark and I'm tired from all the crawling."

Meilin strained her eyes to see Anka, but the elder Greencloak completely blended into the night.

"You know that I have no idea where you are right now. Between the clouds covering the moon and your camouflage ability ... it's like I'm talking into a void."

There was a brief flash of light, then Meilin could see Anka's silhouette leaning against her bag. Anka had returned Toey to his passive state as a tattoo on her wrist.

"Better?" she asked.

“Yes, it’s nice to somewhat see who I’m talking to.” Meilin wasn’t usually one to share her feelings, but over the course of their journey, she’d grown closer to Anka. It felt good to have someone a little older around, especially someone from Zhong. It felt as if she’d gained a big sister.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do after all this is over?” Meilin asked her.

“You mean, when we complete the mission?” Anka paused, thinking about her answer. “I guess I’ll return to Zhong. Help in the recovery. Unless the Greencloaks need me elsewhere. What about you?”

“I’d like to go home to Jano Rion, even if only for a little while. Rollan and I were on the way there when Olvan called for us, and then all this happened.”

“You deserve the chance to go home,” Anka said. “You’re a legend over there.”

“I don’t know about the legend stuff.... I just want to see everyone.” Meilin sighed at the thought of the people who wouldn’t be there anymore. People like her father. “Speaking of seeing people,” Meilin said, hoping to change the subject. “Why do you keep yourself hidden most of the time?”

“I don’t know,” Anka answered. “Toey likes to be out and I don’t even think about it. It’s like if I’m breathing, my body automatically blends into the background. In fact, I have to concentrate if I want to be seen.”

“But doesn’t it bother you that people forget you’re around?”

Anka shrugged. “Not really. You’d be surprised at how much I get to see when people don’t remember I’m there. But the truth is that *everybody* conceals themselves, at least partly. Even from our friends. I’ll bet you do it, too, without really thinking about it. We skip details that are unflattering or scary, or cloak ourselves in the customs of

the region we're in. There are lots of ways to hide.... Mine is just the most noticeable."

Meilin didn't have anything else to say. Perhaps Anka was right and she was being the most honest of them all. Meilin did keep some things hidden. Feelings and fears that she didn't even like admitting to herself. And not just silly things like being afraid of spiders: also the real worries, like being afraid to get hurt. She'd believed that a true warrior wouldn't allow herself to be vulnerable, and that's why she always kept her emotions in check.

But was love really a weakness, or was it a strength?

Meilin wasn't always sure.



## VALLEY OF DEATH

CONOR STUMBLED ON THE UNEVEN GROUND AND FELL onto his right knee. He quickly popped back up as if nothing had happened, grateful that the night shrouded his clumsiness. For the last few hours, he'd been trying to keep up with Xanthe, but these mountains were more like the ones in western Amaya, where they'd first encountered Arax, than the rolling hills near his home in Eura.

"Uraza, over there!" Abeke pointed to something a few yards away.

Briggan hurdled over a rock to beat the leopard to whatever animal they'd both been chasing.

"Looks like Briggan may have won," Conor said, getting close enough to see the wolf sticking his snout into a small, rocky opening.

"Careful ... hyraxes are tricky," Abeke warned as Briggan tried pawing his way into the hole.

"Hyrax?" Conor repeated. "I thought it was a rabbit."

"It sort of looks like a rabbit," Abeke explained. "Except it has no tail and round ears. People call them rock rabbits because—"

“Look out, Briggan!” Xanthe called out, just as the hyrax darted between Briggan’s legs and right by Uraza’s snapping jaws.

The chase was on again, with Uraza and Briggan taking off after their small prey.

“Glad someone’s having fun out here,” Conor remarked, rubbing his knee. “Hope you’re about to tell us that the path gets a whole lot smoother up ahead.”

“Um, not quite,” Xanthe said. “We’re going to have to double back. It’s narrow and steep, and it looks like the path itself has fallen away. We’re going to have to find another way around.”

“But going around the base of these mountains might add an extra day or two.” Conor knew they’d taken the only visible path over the mountain. “We’ve bought some time with the hyena thing, but the Oathbound will keep looking for us. We can’t waste so much time out in the open.”

Abeke placed a hand on Uraza, who was now holding the dead hyrax in her mouth. “It’s not like we have a choice.”

“Well, we actually do. Follow me.” Xanthe backtracked down the path, stopped next to a large pile of rocks, and tried pushing a large boulder out of the way. “Conor, help me with this.”

Conor put his shoulder into it and the boulder shifted a few feet to reveal the opening to a dark cave. “You want to make camp in there?” He peered over some large rocks that still blocked the bottom of the entrance. He couldn’t see a thing inside.

“Yes.” Xanthe climbed over the rocks and went inside. “But more importantly, I’m thinking we can go through the mountain instead of going around it.”

“How far back do you think this thing goes?” Abeke motioned for Uraza to stay outside while she joined Xanthe.

“Pretty far, from the vibrations I get.” Xanthe’s voice echoed against the walls. “But we can always have Rollan open it up whenever it dead-ends.”

Conor entered and quickly lit a match. In the flickering light he could see that the cave extended into tunnels. Abeke was still close to the entrance, but he could see Xanthe's white hair as she explored the far side.

"Ow!" Conor flicked the match to the ground as the flame burned his fingertips. The cave immediately went black again, except for the fading red glow of the matchstick that now lay at Conor's feet.

"I don't think moving mountains is a good idea." Conor headed back outside where it wasn't quite as dark. "The Heart of the Land could cause a cave-in. We'd be trapped."

"But we might face a bigger risk out there with the hyenas and the Oathbound," Xanthe countered. "And this cave could stretch deep into the mountain. We can make camp in here while I go check it out."

Uraza jumped inside, followed by Briggan. They both seemed to have made their own decisions to stay inside for the remainder of the night.

"Traitor," Conor grumbled.

"Well, if there really is a field of skulls up ahead," Abeke mused, "then hopefully whatever separated the skulls from their bodies won't expect us to come through the mountain." Abeke leaned over the group of rocks that formed a barrier to the cave entrance. She stared at the sky. "Any sort of trap would be set for those who come over or around it."

"I guess, but let's see what the others think before we decide," Conor suggested. He took a seat near the cave entrance, where he could still feel the night air.

A bird screeched somewhere outside.

Conor sat a little straighter, his hearing amplified because of Briggan. "That sounds like Essix."

Abeke pointed to something in the night sky. "It is! She knows we're here."

Briggan stretched out next to Conor. "Well, I'm guessing she'll bring the others here in the morning." Conor rubbed

the wolf's belly.

Abeke took out a small blanket from her bag and laid it flat on the ground. Uraza quickly curled up at the bottom of it. "Ahem, I was going to lie there." Abeke smiled. "Guess we'll share."

As Conor drifted off to sleep, he heard the leopard purr in agreement.



Dawn was already breaking when a voice pierced through Conor's dream of running down the hillside toward his home in Eura.

"Wake up, sleepyheads!" Rollan commanded. His hands were on the rocks at the entrance of the cave as he climbed inside. Daylight streamed in from behind him. "Don't you want to see that field full of skulls and drain the demon's blood? Mwahaha!"

"Rollan, give them a minute." Meilin swung her legs over the small barrier wall and walked into the cave.

Conor opened one eye, wishing he could have five more minutes of sleep. It had been a long time since he'd seen his family, and he liked having them pop up in his dreams.

"Someone has a ton of energy," Xanthe remarked from deeper in the cave.

"You aren't kidding," Anka grumbled, clearly visible to everyone. Conor assumed she'd placed Toey in passive state. Perhaps even Anka liked to be seen once in a while.

"I think Jhi's influence made Rollan a little *too* well rested," Meilin said. "He's been chirping like this the whole walk here." Meilin pulled out her canteen and took a small sip of water. "Mental note for next time."

"Funny." Rollan stayed outside the cave and looked up at the mountain. "Did you notice that the path ends up ahead? Looks like we'll have to find a different way to get to the face in the mountain."

"Yeah, about that." Conor rubbed the back of his stiff neck. "Xanthe had an idea, but I'm not sure if—"

"Why don't we just tell them and let them decide for themselves." Xanthe drew closer, wearing Abeke's cloak to shield her from the soft morning sun.

"What's the idea?" Meilin glanced from Abeke to Conor, then back to Abeke.

"We were thinking that going around will probably take a couple of days," Abeke explained. "And if there are some sort of traps that gave the valley of death its name, they'd probably be on the typical paths around or over the mountains."

"So Xanthe found a different way?" Meilin looked over at Xanthe for more information.

"Well, last night I explored the cave a bit." She motioned behind her where one of the tunnels grew dark. "And that one extends deep into the center of the mountain."

"Uh-huh." Meilin waited for more, but Xanthe didn't say anything else. "But it ends, right? So we can't go through."

"Oh, wait. I get it." Rollan's expression changed. He snapped his fingers. "You want me to get us through the rest of it."

"I already explained that we've faced a similar situation before," Conor stated. "And we decided we couldn't use it because it was too risky. And nothing has changed."

"But it has changed. It was different with Worthy." Abeke stroked Uraza, who remained curled up on the blanket. "The cave was completely unstable back then. Any movement could've caused the whole thing to collapse. That's not the case here. And Rollan's gotten much better at using the bond token, too."

"I *am* pretty good at using it." Rollan ran his hand along the inside wall of the cave. "But I wouldn't be able to make a tunnel like I did when we were underground. There I only

had to shift the dirt and sand." He knocked on the stone. "This is too solid."

"So that's that." Abeke stood up, pushed Uraza off, and shook out the blanket. "We go around and brace ourselves for whatever's out there."

Rollan pulled out a loose stone from the wall. "But maybe I can make enough cracks where we can take out the rocks and make our own tunnel."

"Rollan." Meilin pulled him aside. "Do you even know how to do that? This would probably be a lot harder than moving dirt, and if you mess up—"

"I won't mess up." He sidestepped Meilin to speak directly to Xanthe. "Do you know how far we'd have to go?"

"I tried to get a feel of the cave's vibrations like in Sadre. It's not the same because this is aboveground, but I think I could direct you to where there's another cave that comes in from the other side of the mountain. There's about ten feet or so of solid rock between them, though."

"So I'd have to make enough cracks where we can create a tunnel between the two caves." Rollan pursed his lips and nodded. "Yeah, I think I can do that ... but I should practice first." He pulled out the Heart of the Land from under his shirt and lifted the chain over his head. He clutched the amulet in his hand and pushed against the cave wall. A rumbling and creaking noise filled the air.

"Whoa!" Meilin shouted. "Stop!"

Rollan yanked his fist away from the wall. Cracks resembling a spiderweb had already formed, boring into the stone. He dug his fingertips around one of the larger splintered pieces of rock and jostled it back and forth. Then he pulled it out, leaving behind a hole several inches deep.

"Hey, this might actually work!" Conor exclaimed.

"You doubted me?" Rollan smirked.

"Didn't doubt you," Conor explained. "I doubted the mountain."

"Uraza," Abeke called to the leopard. "I think it'll be easier if you make the journey in passive state."

Conor glanced over at Briggan. "You too, boy."

Both animals stepped forward and disappeared, emerging as tattoos on their respective partners.

"I'm not even going to bother asking Essix," Rollan said. "She'll either fly around and find us, or she'll follow us through the tunnel."

"So let's get started," Xanthe said, ready to lead the way. "You'll have to light the lantern. It gets very dark in there."

The group gathered their things and walked into the center of the mountain, following Xanthe through several twists and turns. Eventually, they reached the dead end Xanthe had mentioned.

"All right, then.... Here we go." Rollan struck the cave wall with the side of his fist while clutching the Heart of the Land.

The mountain rumbled and groaned with every hit as cracks splintered the wall. Piece by piece, bit by bit, the group took chunks out of the mountain. It was slow and tedious work that, after several hours, left many of their fingers bleeding.

"We're through!" Abeke yelled when a piece of cave wall fell back into the opening on the other side.

Conor and Meilin pushed the remaining rocks and boulders until they could all crawl through the hole. A long, winding tunnel led them to an opening where daylight streamed in. The five Greencloaks and Xanthe stood side by side, looking out at a mountain on the opposite side of the green valley down below.

"There it is." Xanthe pointed to a part of the mountain that looked like a man's profile. "The face in the mountain that Sodu described seeing and that Tembo wrote about."

It was unmistakable. The wind had chiseled out the curve of his forehead, the sunken area of his eyes, the steep

angle of his nose, and a very prominent chin.

Conor gazed at the valley below, filled with bushes and a few acacia trees. There was a small stream running down the center of it. It was all very peaceful. Nothing like the barren wasteland he had imagined. "And is that supposed to be the valley of death?" he muttered.

"Doesn't quite live up to its name, huh?" Abeke replied.

"Meh, you never know." Rollan grabbed a small rock and threw it as far as he could. "It could be a trap to lull you into thinking nothing is wrong and then ... Whack! Your head is chopped off."

"I can't see much right now." Xanthe was shielding her eyes, the hood of Abeke's cloak pulled low so it nearly covered her nose. "Do any of you see skulls?"

"No," Meilin answered. "But maybe it's been so long that they're all buried by now."

Conor looked back at Xanthe. She had stepped farther inside the cave to avoid the direct midday sun. Even with Abeke's cloak as protection, she wouldn't be able to hike in the daytime for too long. "Maybe we should wait until it gets dark. Head out then."

"No, you can't waste any time," Xanthe answered without hesitation. "I'll only be slowing you down from this point on. You have to go without me."

"But we can't leave you here." Abeke's voice was full of concern. "Nilo can be a dangerous place, especially if you're alone. You have the hyenas and other animals out here. Never mind the Oathbound."

"I'm a warrior.... I can take care of myself," Xanthe answered, taking another step back. "And I really should go back to see Takoda. Let him know that I'm safe." She retreated even farther into the dark cave. "I'll travel at night and I'll be fine. But you need to go finish your mission. My job was to get you to this point."

Meilin gave Xanthe a small nod of gratitude. "Thank you for helping us."

Abeke wasn't convinced. "But maybe Xanthe can wait and—"

"Good luck, my friends." Xanthe waved to them. "I hope our paths cross again soon." She turned and ran back into the cave.

"Guess she didn't want to discuss it anymore," Anka said, calling out Toey, who scampered up her cloak. Within seconds Anka's form faded from view as her skin and clothes blended against the side of the mountain.

"Xanthe understands that this is important." Meilin pointed to a way down toward the valley. "Now, let's stay alert for any traps."

Rollan and Anka followed Meilin, while Conor stayed behind with Abeke for a moment.

"I had the vision again," he whispered. "Last night."

"The one with the big tidal wave?"

Conor nodded. "I'm watching from somewhere up high, and I can see the ocean pull away just before the wave comes barreling toward me. I just wish I knew more about what it means or the circumstances around it."

"You can't force that kind of thing." Abeke touched his arm. "You have to be patient."

Conor gave her a smile. "You sound like Master Naveb."

"He definitely had some insight into each of us." Abeke paused. "Well, most of us. He didn't have much to say about Anka."

"He may not have remembered that she was there. She's pretty good at making people forget about her."

"ABEKE! CONOR!" Meilin shouted. She had reached the valley floor and was holding her sword high above her head.

Conor and Abeke sprinted down the mountain, calling out Briggan and Uraza as they ran. As both animals appeared, neither one hesitated. Each took a fraction of a second to assess the situation and race to whatever had confronted the others down below.

In his mind, Conor braced himself for what he might find. He imagined the ground covered with half-rotten skulls and something that might put his own head in jeopardy. A trap, a ferocious animal, a vicious attacker, or something completely indescribable. But he was not prepared for what he saw as he drew closer to the valley.

It was Rollan. He was sitting in the middle of the field ... laughing hysterically.

Uraza and Briggan were pacing around all the bushes, looking as confused as Conor felt.

“What are you doing?” Abeke spun around, trying to understand what was so funny.

“The field of skulls.” Rollan cupped his hand under the stem of one of the large plants. “Look!”

Conor drew closer and noticed the dried seedpods that clung to the stem. Each one looked like a small brown skull. The entire valley was full of them.

Meilin swung her sword against another plant, knocking several of the seedpods into the air. “This is what we were so worried about.” She spun around, taking a swipe at another bush. “A bunch of dried-up plant parts.”

“Snapdragons,” Abeke confirmed. “It didn’t even occur to me. When the flowers die and fall away, what’s left behind are the seedpods that look like skulls.”

“And here I was thinking that there would be traps trying to chop our heads off.” Rollan stood and shook the dirt off his pants. “Makes me think that there may not be a demon to kill, either.”

Uraza and Briggan had relaxed and were now simply inspecting the area.

Conor looked around for something that might resemble a demon. All he could see were more of the snapdragon plants and, on the other side of the valley, the small mountain with the face jutting out.

“Those trees.” Abeke trekked through the snapdragon plants, mesmerized by something. Conor, Meilin, Rollan,

and Anka all followed as she crossed the valley and got to the foot of the opposite mountain. "Up there. There's a cluster of them on that ridge."

"You think it has something to do with demons?" Conor tilted his head as if trying to see them from a different angle.

"They *are* the demons." Abeke smiled. "Demon trees that bleed red sap."

"So that's the blood we have to drain?" Rollan looked relieved. "Plain old tree sap? I'm really liking this part of the mission. Tembo had a good sense of humor."

"Although it looks like we might have to do some rock climbing to get up there." Abeke stared at the sheer cliff.

"Rollan and I will do it," Meilin said. She slipped off her bag and dug around inside it.

"Um, it might be nice if you asked before volunteering me." Rollan pointed to Conor's bag. "And if you're looking for the ropes, they're over there."

"I can go with you, Meilin," Abeke offered. "It shouldn't be hard to get the sap.... Just nick the tree and attach one of our canteens to collect it. It might take a while, though. We'll probably have to stay up there until tomorrow, because the sap can drip pretty slowly."

"I didn't say I wouldn't go," Rollan clarified. "Just that I'd like to be asked, not told. And it does make more sense for me and Meilin to go up."

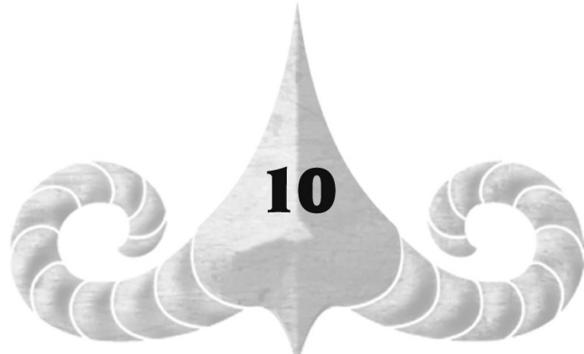
Conor and Abeke exchanged a quick glance and smiled. They both knew that Rollan liked the idea of spending some time alone with Meilin.

"What?" Rollan protested. "It's better if the two people going up are tied together, and a counterbalance works best if both people are similar in weight ... in case either one falls, the other will be able to support them. Remember what happened when we were scaling the walls to get the

Wildcat's Claw? That's why I'm saying it. Meilin and I are closer in size."

"Riiight," Conor said in mock deference. "It's just science."

Rollan had a broad smile on his face as he glanced at Meilin. "Exactly."



## SLINGSHOT

**S**CALING MOUNTAINS WAS NOT ONE OF ROLLAN'S FAVORITE things to do, but it wasn't the worst, either. It ranked somewhere between eating seal fat and swimming in the ocean at night. But he did like spending time with Meilin. That made the climb worthwhile.

"Watch your step over here." Rollan inched his way along a long, narrow foothold where only the tips of his toes fit. "Putting another anchor in." He lodged the metal anchor into a crack in the mountain and slipped the rope that connected the two of them through it. This was much safer than when they had used vines to get to the Wildcat's Claw.

"All right!" Meilin called out. She was taking out the anchors every time she got to one so they could reuse them later on. Eventually she would collect all seven and either take over the lead or hand them back to Rollan.

They were about halfway to the ridge and making decent time. Up above them, Rollan could see plenty of handholds and a couple of narrow ledges where they'd be able to stop, rest, and catch their breaths before continuing to climb.

“How about I go up through here?” Rollan turned to look over his shoulder at Meilin. “Meilin?”

He followed the rope and saw Meilin was already higher than he was, scaling up the mountain. “This way is better,” she shouted down. “There are more crevices for the anchors over here. Shift back.”

Rollan was about to argue that *he* was supposed to be leading, but it was pointless. Meilin was already putting in the second anchor. It would be more dangerous to have her come back down.

He took a careful step sideways along the tiny ledge.

No, he was definitely going to say something. They were a team. Decisions needed to be made together. Meilin had a habit of forgetting that.

“Hey, Meilin, you can’t just take off and expect me to follow. We’re supposed to be a unit.” A rock bounced off the mountain from above, narrowly missing him as it came tumbling down.

“Yeah, but this way up was better,” she insisted.

Rollan plucked off an anchor and continued along the ledge, his frustration rising with every backtracking step he took. “Doesn’t matter. It’s not only you up here. You aren’t back in Zhong giving orders like some sort of Imperial Guard.”

Meilin stopped climbing and looked back at Rollan. “That’s not fair. You know I’m not like that.” Another rock tumbled from above. “Plus, I’ve been trying—”

A flurry of rocks the size of Rollan’s fist smashed against the mountainside, interrupting Meilin. But this wasn’t a rockslide from above. No, these rocks were being aimed at them from below.

Rollan looked down and saw several people jumping out from beneath the snapdragon bushes ... slingshots in their hands. They weren’t wearing the black that the Oathbound

normally wore, but that didn't make them any less dangerous.

Farther back, Abeke, Conor, and their spirit animals charged across the field to do battle with the slingshot-wielding menaces. He and Meilin needed to get down there to help.

"ROLLAN!" Meilin yelled as the rocks stopped. She was pointing to a ledge high above them.

A flurry of arrows whizzed by Rollan's head, headed toward the valley.

Rollan looked up at the ridge. Several people dressed in loose-fitting, sand-colored clothing stood on the edge, with bows aimed at the valley below. Rollan followed the arrows' path and saw them land right in front of his friends. Conor and Abeke split apart, scrambling to find cover.

Essix swooped down from the sky and attacked one of the men. The archer swung wildly with his bow, using it like a bludgeon to fight her off. Rollan could hear the man scream as Essix raked her sharp talons across his face.

"SURRENDER!" a voice shouted down at them. "Do not move or we won't miss next time."

"Rollan, we have to do something!" Meilin started to climb faster, ignoring the warning. "They have the advantage up there."

"Hold on tight!" Rollan took out the Heart of the Land. He thought if he could focus all his energy on hitting the mountain, he could cause a tremor. Enough to shake the trees and maybe knock a few of the archers off the ledge. "Here it goes."

Just then another hail of stones flew at them. The slingers were back, and this time they were hitting their marks. Rollan's calf burned, and he hissed as a rock struck the back of his leg.

Another rock pegged him in the back, knocking the air from his lungs.

He glanced up at Meilin just in time to see a large rock hit the back of her head.

"MEILIN!" Rollan's voice echoed through the valley down below, but he couldn't do anything as her hands dropped to her sides, letting go of the handholds. Rollan saw her dark hair drape down her back as her body arched and peeled away from the mountain. She tumbled backward, knocking out two of the anchors as she sailed past Rollan on her way down.

Rollan braced himself. Only his counterweight would save Meilin from crashing against the rocks below. The rope's slack disappeared as it snapped tight against his chest and thrust him against the mountain, pulling him up higher as Meilin dropped several more feet. Then everything stopped. The third and fourth anchors held tight and Rollan regained his footing ... but on the other end of the rope Meilin's limp body dangled in midair.

An arrow flew overhead, this time headed toward the ridge, striking one of the attackers. Abeke was trying to give them cover, but there was no place for them to hide ... nowhere to go. All Rollan knew was that he had to help Meilin. She couldn't hang like that for long.

Rollan grasped the Heart of the Land as tightly as he could and pushed against the mountain with all his might. He tried focusing all his thoughts and energy into moving the mountain. If he could create a ledge just below Meilin, he could then lower her onto it by giving the rope some slack. But he didn't even know if it was possible to force a piece of the mountain to jut out.

He had to try. Meilin's life depended on it.

Rollan concentrated, ignoring everything else in the world.

The mountain began to shake. He could hear shouting from their attackers, mixed in with the thundering rumble of rocks cascading from different areas.

He didn't care. He was going to save Meilin.

"ARGHH!" he grunted as all his energy poured out of himself and into the amulet.

Rollan didn't even realize that the fighting had stopped. He didn't know that there were no more rocks being hurled at them, no more arrows flying back and forth. His adrenaline was flowing and he was solely focused on Meilin. He could feel the weight of her body pulling on the rope.

The mountain rumbled and groaned as if in pain. Still, Rollan forced it to shift. He had never tapped into so much of the amulet's energy. Inch by inch, a narrow ledge unfolded, forming a few feet beneath Meilin.

Once it was about three feet wide, he stopped to catch his breath.

"What kind of power do you have over our mountain?" a gruff voice called out.

Rollan ignored it. He slowly climbed up, allowing the rope to slide through the remaining anchors, which in turn allowed Meilin to gently fall onto the newly formed ledge.

"Answer us!" the voice demanded, but there was no show of force to back up the words. The arrows and rocks had ceased.

"I have to check on my friend!" Rollan shouted. He untied the rope around his chest and quickly scaled down to where Meilin lay.

"Meilin," he whispered, crouching down beside her. He lifted her head and his fingers came away bloody. "Come on, Meilin. Open your eyes," he said. "We need Jhi. She can help you. You have to call her out."

Meilin's body remained limp in his arms.

"Your falcon!" a much deeper voice shouted from above. "Call it back into passive state or we will finish what we started."

For the first time since Meilin had been hit, Rollan took a good look at his surroundings.

The sun was beginning to set over the western mountains. He could hear Essix squawking. Above Rollan were warriors with arrows pointed directly at him and Meilin. Down below in the valley, Abeke and Conor were sitting among the snapdragon bushes with their hands over their heads, another group of warriors surrounding them. Uraza and Briggan were nowhere in sight. Rollan assumed that they must have been forced back into their passive states as well.

“Call off the falcon!” the voice yelled again, sounding a little more desperate.

Rollan imagined that Essix was fighting some of the warriors ... and likely winning.

An arrow hit the ground, narrowly missing Meilin by a few inches. “Get the falcon out of here or the next one won’t miss!”

“Essix! ESSIX!” Rollan wobbled as he stood up, a sudden wave of exhaustion hitting him. “Please,” Rollan begged, pulling open his shirt, hoping the falcon realized that he had to do this to help Meilin. “Come!”

Essix flew away from the ridge and swooped past Rollan. Their eyes connected, and Rollan knew that the falcon understood the gravity of the situation.

A brief flash and the falcon tattoo appeared over Rollan’s heart.

“She’s gone,” Rollan shouted. “What do you want from us?”

There was silence. Rollan gazed over at Meilin again. He had never thought of her as fragile, but that’s exactly how she looked. He would do anything to protect her.

“I am Jehan, leader of the Dasat,” a strong, feminine voice called down. “We saw what you did. How do you hold such power over this mountain?”

There was no way Rollan was going to tell her about the Heart of the Land. “It doesn’t matter, but I can do much worse if you don’t leave us alone.” Rollan hoped this might

be enough to frighten their attackers because, truth be told, he was far too weak to use the bond token again.

"Your friend is hurt.... We can help her," Jehan offered.

"You are the ones who hurt her!" Rollan countered.

Three long ropes tumbled down the mountainside toward the ledge. Rollan knew there was nowhere for them to go. And even if there were, neither he nor Meilin were in any shape to move.

"Climb up!" Jehan commanded. "That's an order."

Rollan was sitting next to Meilin once again, cradling her head. His own body was spent. Moving the mountain had drained him of all his energy. "I can't. I'm too weak." His voice shook as he spoke. "And I'm not leaving her here."

"Tie the rope around your waist and we will pull you up," Jehan offered. "Once we talk, if I'm satisfied by your answers, then I'll send a rescue team for your friend. It's the only way to save her."

Rollan didn't like the idea, but he knew there was no other way. Meilin needed to get off this mountain. She needed help. Her head had stopped bleeding, but she wasn't waking up.

He bent over and gave Meilin a kiss on the forehead. "I'm sorry," he said softly in her ear. "I hope I'm doing the right thing." He placed her head gently on the ground, tied the rope around his waist, and gave it a tug. "All right!" Rollan yelled. "Pull me up. Just get her rescue ready."



## THE HUNT

**A**BEKE COULDN'T BELIEVE THAT AFTER EVERYTHING they'd been through, including epic wars with the Devourer and the Wyrm, the Dasat tribe had caught them completely unaware. Even Uraza hadn't spotted them until it was too late.

"Look! Here come your friends." Khai, one of the guards, pointed toward a group carrying torches down the mountain. Even though it was dark, the light from the torches revealed an exhausted Rollan using two people as support as he walked with his head hung low. Behind him, several of the Dasat carried a wooden stretcher with Meilin strapped on top. "We'll see what they have to say."

"They'll tell you the truth, just as I have." Abeke tried wiggling the ropes that held her hands behind her back. After being captured, they had all been brought to the small Dasat camp on the other side of the mountain. "We only needed to get a bit of sap from the tree, and then we would have been on our way."

Khai shook his head. "Greencloaks never want one thing. They always demand more."

“But there was no reason to attack us,” Conor argued, sitting on one of the many colorful rugs strewn around the camp. He was tied together with Anka, back to back. “We could have explained what we were doing. We meant no harm.”

“A Dasat hunter captures their prey first, then decides what to do with it,” Khai replied, bending down to get closer to Conor. “That’s why I cornered you and your wolf in the valley. But in this case, I won’t be the one to decide what to do with you … that’ll be Jehan’s decision.”

“Who’s Jehan?” Abeke asked.

“I am.” A girl not much older than the Greencloaks motioned for the others to take Meilin to one of the tents. She wore a long, golden-brown scarf over her head and had sun-kissed skin and dark hair that peeked out from the edge of the scarf. “I’m the leader of the Dasat. This is our territory. No one enters without our permission. Your friend’s injuries are the unfortunate consequence of her refusal to follow instructions.”

“Jehan, we meant no harm,” Abeke insisted. “We were simply—”

“Searching for the edge of the land, once you’d stolen the sap of the demon blood tree, correct?” Jehan smiled as Abeke’s eyebrows scrunched together. “Don’t be so surprised. Your friend Rollan was most informative … once he was given the right incentive.”

A honey badger scurried between the guards, causing them to jump aside and give it a wide berth. Abeke knew that these animals were among the most fearless hunters in Nilo, taking on even lions many times their size. The honey badger wasn’t big. In fact it looked similar to a skunk, with a white stripe down its weasel-like body. But its sharp claws and bad attitude made it a ferocious fighter. No one wanted to mess with one of these animals.

The honey badger circled Anka and Conor, pausing briefly to give a guttural hiss and bare its teeth at them.

"Livora," Jehan reprimanded the animal. The honey badger glanced back, thought better of trying to pick a fight, and trotted over to stand next to Jehan.

Abeke realized that Jehan was Marked, and that the honey badger was her spirit animal. It made sense. Abeke could see that Jehan had the respect of much older and stronger members of her group. She was probably as smart and ferocious as Livora.

"You said you would help her." Rollan glanced back at the tent where Meilin had been carried. "You'll keep your word, right?"

"Of course." Jehan unsheathed a long, sharp knife that she carried at her waist. "But you still haven't truly explained how that ledge on the mountain moved." She strolled over to Abeke and stood behind her.

"I did." Rollan gave Abeke a quick glance. "It's from my spirit animal bond. A power that comes from within me.... Only I can tap into it ... no one else."

So Rollan wasn't giving away *all* their secrets. Only what was necessary to help Meilin. He hadn't told them about the Heart of the Land or the fact that anyone could use it.

"So you say." Jehan raised the knife above Abeke's head.

"NO!" Conor yelled as Jehan sliced the air with the knife, bringing it down with whiplike speed.

Abeke didn't see the blade sailing down. She only felt the parting of the air behind her back, and then her hands were free. Jehan hadn't hurt her. Instead, she'd cut the ropes around her wrists.

"No reason to have a fellow Niloan tied up." Jehan put the knife back in the leather holster. "The Dasat are an honorable people."

Abeke rubbed her wrists. "What about the others?" She pointed to Anka and Conor.

Jehan chuckled. "We're honorable ... not stupid." She waved over one of the warriors who had shot at them with

the slingshots. “Take the Niloan Greencloak to the injured girl in my tent. Once she gets better, we will escort them all back across the mountains from where they came.”

“Wait.” Rollan took a step forward. “I want to go with Meilin.”

Jehan shook her head. “I’m sure you do, but it’s not your decision.”

“I know of the Dasat,” Abeke said. “Your skills are legendary throughout Nilo. Growing up I would hear stories of your hunting abilities … but no one in my village knew if you still existed.”

“We most certainly exist,” Khai scoffed. “Otherwise you wouldn’t be our prisoners.”

“Guests,” Jehan corrected him. “They don’t have to be prisoners, if they agree to leave the same way they came.”

“But I wonder if all the stories are true,” Abeke mused. She watched as the honey badger used her large claws to dig a burrow a few feet away. “The incredible hunts and contests that the Dasat were said to hold. Rumor had it that they never turned away from a challenge.”

Conor seemed to guess what Abeke was thinking. “We’ve met plenty of exceptional hunters and warriors in our travels,” he said. “Like the Tergesh in Zhong and the Ardu in Arctica.”

“Ha!” Khai rolled his eyes. “As if they could hold a candle to any of the Dasat.”

Abeke had hoped that Rollan would chime in—he was usually good at this sort of thing—but the boy kept his eyes on the tent where Meilin was being treated. He wasn’t paying attention to anything that was being said.

“Perhaps we should have a contest,” Abeke suggested. “Some of the stories I heard claimed the Dasat were always eager to prove their skills.”

“What do you have in mind?” Khai asked, his eyes sparkling at the thought of a challenge.

“Your best against our best,” Conor said.

“No.” Jehan quashed the idea. “We’ve already proven our skills in capturing you. Soon you’ll leave and be grateful that we let you live to tell the tale. We’re not here for games.”

Livora popped her head up from the burrow, as if something had piqued her interest. The honey badger scampered over to a barrel and, rising up on her hind legs, clawed her way to the top.

“There’s nothing to eat there,” Jehan said to her spirit animal.

Livora jumped down and ran between Rollan’s legs. The boy blinked, as if coming to. He turned his attention away from the tent and back to the group.

“What if there’s an incentive for the winner?” Rollan asked.

Abeke smiled. Rollan had been listening after all.

“Go on.” Jehan’s shrewd eyes watched him.

“If your challenger wins”—Rollan paused to consider his words—“I’ll show you how I moved the mountain.”

“I thought you said it was your spirit animal bond?” Jehan questioned, her arms folded across her chest.

“Yes, but I can show you how to work together with *your* spirit animal.” Rollan pointed to the honey badger, who was busily gnawing on a rock. “That’s what Greencloaks do, after all. Perhaps you could discover your own power.”

Jehan seemed to entertain the idea. “And if you win ... what is it that you want?”

“If we win ...” Abeke spoke slowly, carefully considering what she was going to say. “You simply let us cross to get the sap.”

“And you tell no one that we were ever here,” Anka added.

“Ah, yes.” Jehan nodded. “Rollan spoke of these Oathbound who are chasing you.” The girl paced back and forth. “We’re not involved in your dealings with the

Oathbound. We'll take no side in your battle, as neither is a proven friend of the Dasat."

"Jehan." Khai slowly walked around Conor, evaluating him. "I know I can beat these Greencloaks. This one and his wolf tried to attack me earlier. I would enjoy battling him again."

"And you swear that you'll show me how you moved the mountain?" Jehan asked Rollan.

He nodded as several of the Dasat gathered around. Word had already spread that a challenge had been issued.

"Then I see no harm in having a hunting contest," Jehan declared, turning to look at everyone. "Just as our old Dasat traditions dictate," she announced. "We shall give this matter over to the twin sisters of Fate and Skill, who guide every hunter's path. The first hunter to return with a significant kill will be declared the victor." She spun back around. "Our most resourceful hunter, Khai, shall be our representative."

The crowd cheered.

Jehan then looked at Rollan. "And who is your representative?"

"She is." Rollan pointed to Abeke, who stepped forward to stand next to Khai. Abeke could sense it was a stark contrast; the hunter dwarfed her in height and width.

The Dasat began laughing, and she heard murmuring rise throughout the crowd.

Khai was not pleased. "This is who you choose?" He grabbed Abeke under her arms and lifted her as if she were a small child. "This isn't a challenge ... it is an insult. And I will not—"

Abeke swung her leg, catching him unaware. As he lost his balance, the hunter dropped her, and she landed lightly on her hands and feet. She turned and gave Khai a strong kick in the stomach that sent him flying onto his back, then quickly pressed her foot against the base of his neck.

"You're correct," Abeke hissed, bending over to get close to his face. "It doesn't seem like much of a challenge ... does it?"

Khai glared at her and batted away her leg.

"You going to let her do that to you, Khai?" someone called out.

"Khai, how's the view from down there?" another voice laughed.

"Enough!" Jehan raised her hands and the crowd quickly grew silent. "We would all do well to remember that a hunter is not measured by his ... *or her* ... size." She faced Abeke. "You will not use your spirit animal during the hunt. This is a test of your skill alone. Is that clear?"

Abeke wasn't worried. She knew she could hold her own with the very best hunters. "Understood, but I will need my bow and arrows."

"Of course." Jehan motioned for one of the Dasat guards to get her things.

"What about Meilin?" Rollan asked, his voice laced with worry. "Someone needs to help her."

"Agreed." Jehan's face seemed to soften as she studied Rollan. "Since the Niloan Greencloak will be gone, I think it's best if you go to my tent and stay with your friend. The others will stay elsewhere."

"Thank you," Rollan said as the Dasat guard handed Abeke her bow and a quiver full of arrows, which she immediately inspected.

"And when does the hunt begin?" Anka asked.

Jehan lifted a single eyebrow and smiled. "It already has."

"What?" Abeke spun around and noticed that Khai had disappeared into the crowd. He not only had the advantage of knowing the terrain, but now he had a head start.

"But that's not fair," Conor protested. "There was no warning."

Jehan shrugged. "You can waste time arguing or you can begin the hunt."

Rollan's eyes met Abeke's. She gave him a slow nod. She would do this for them. And for Meilin. Failure was not an option.



Crossing the valley, Abeke kept her eyes peeled for any type of movement. She hadn't spotted any large game during the day, but there would certainly be nocturnal animals wandering the valley floor at night. She remembered seeing a watering hole as they were being brought to camp. That would be a good place to seek out game. The only problem would be if a predator turned the tables on her. This hunter had no interest in becoming the hunted.

The moonlit sky cast enough light for Abeke to see by. Every once in a while, she would hear a noise and pause, but she had yet to detect anything large enough to waste an arrow on. She contemplated shooting a very small warthog she spied hiding near a snapdragon bush, but feared that wouldn't be enough. It didn't seem like something the Dasat would consider *significant*.

She was approaching a clearing not far from the watering hole when she saw it. A lone gazelle stood placidly, foraging for its own bit of food. Abeke silently pulled out an arrow from her quiver and nocked it on her bow. She took aim and waited for the perfect shot.

The gazelle froze, sensing something was amiss.

Abeke held the arrow, watching the gazelle sniff the air.

The way the animal took in its surroundings reminded her of Uraza. Abeke's fingers trembled. It was like when she had been forced to shoot her beloved spirit animal. Abeke blinked, trying to cast out those thoughts and focus on the task at hand.

A perfectly aimed arrow flew through the night and struck the gazelle in the neck, killing it instantly.

For a moment, Abeke thought she had shot the animal, but then she noticed that her fingertips still held her own arrow.

“YES!” Khai ran past Abeke, toward the dead gazelle. “Your hesitation is my victory!” he called out.

Abeke couldn’t believe it. He’d taken the kill from right under her nose. She wasn’t used to being bested by anyone during a hunt. Now the Greencloaks were in serious trouble. Rollan would have to show Jehan how to use the Heart of the Land, and they would be no closer to finding Stormspeaker.

“Ha-ha!” Khai whooped it up as he tossed the gazelle over his shoulders. “And you didn’t even sense me come up behind you! I’m still the king of the hunters!”

A chorus of laughter followed Khai’s celebration. His eyes widened and he jolted to a stop, his body still.

Abeke knew all too well what was making that sound. Hyenas.

Khai spun around, realizing too late that he was surrounded. Abeke thought he would toss the gazelle aside and make a run for it, but instead he pulled out his long knife. He was going to try to leave with his kill.

The hyenas pounced, attacking him from all sides. He slashed at the air, knocking a couple of them away before another one jumped on his back, snapping its jaws on the dead animal.

“Khai!” Abeke called out. “Let them have the gazelle! It’s not worth it.”

“Never!” he answered. A hyena bit down on Khai’s leg and he cried out in pain. Khai grabbed the animal by the head and wrestled it off. “Go! This is not your fight!”

“It is now!” Abeke took aim and shot the hyena as Khai stabbed it along its flank. She called out Uraza with a burst of radiance, and the Great Leopard immediately gave chase

to several hyenas. "There are too many of them for one person!" she said, firing off two more arrows.

Khai spun around. He faced one particularly determined hyena that didn't want to give up on its gazelle meal. "This is mine!" he shouted. "I will bring victory to my people or die trying!"

Abeke wasn't sure if he was speaking to her or the hyena, but it didn't matter. They were now both in the fight together.

Then, from somewhere behind her, Abeke heard a rustling sound as another hyena raced through the tall grass at full speed toward her. She nocked another arrow but didn't have enough time to aim. Just as the hyena lunged at her, Uraza leaped through the air, grasping the animal with her powerful jaws. The two fell to the ground, rolling over each other, while Uraza quickly tore at its body. It wasn't even a close match.

Abeke kept her bow and arrow ready, searching the area for any more attacks, but the night had grown still again.

All the hyenas had disappeared ... and so had Khai with his gazelle.

Abeke had failed her friends.



## INTRUDERS

**M**EILIN SLOWLY OPENED HER EYES. SHE ROLLED HER head to the side and saw Rollan sleeping next to her, his hand holding on to hers. They were both lying on soft mattresses placed on colorful rugs. There was a hint of daylight coming through the fabric of the large tent they were sleeping in.

“Rollan.” Her voice didn’t sound like her own. It was raspy and weak. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Rollan.”

Rollan sat up with a start, pulling at a shackle that chained their ankles together. “You’re awake! You’re awake!” He hugged her, then pulled back to double-check that she was indeed alert. “I’m sorry for arguing with you. I didn’t mean any of it.”

Meilin touched the bandage that was wrapped around her head. She was confused. The last thing she remembered was climbing the mountain with Rollan and arguing about whether she was too bossy. “What happened?”

“You were knocked out for a while, but you will heal,” a voice declared from the opposite side of the tent. “Based on what Rollan’s told me, your spirit animal should help you far better than our herbs.”

Meilin watched as a very pretty girl walked confidently over to the tent’s opening. She pulled aside the fabric and called to someone outside. “Our guests are awake. Bring them some food and fresh water.”

Meilin was confused. Who was this person? How did she know Rollan? And if they were her guests, then why had she shackled Meilin’s leg to Rollan’s? Nothing made sense. “What’s going on?” Meilin asked.

“Her name is Jehan,” Rollan explained. “She’s the leader of the Dasat. They protect these mountains ... as we have painfully discovered.” He gave Jehan a sheepish grin and Jehan returned the smile.

Meilin pursed her lips. She wasn’t sure what had happened while she was out, but she already knew that she didn’t like this girl.

Jehan studied Meilin. “Rollan told me some very impressive stories about the Heroes of Erdas last night. Seems you are a formidable warrior.” A honey badger scampered around the tent, climbing on top of several stacked rugs and then curling into a ball to sleep. “That’s why we had to take certain precautions. We couldn’t take the chance that you’d wake up during the night and try to escape.”

Meilin tried to sit up, but everything seemed to spin and she fell back on her elbows. “So we’re your prisoners.” She didn’t understand how things could have changed so much. “How long was I out?”

“About twelve hours,” Jehan answered. “We tried making you as comfortable as possible ... under the circumstances.” A guard poked his head into the tent, motioning for Jehan to come outside. “I’ll be right back,” she said.

"You got hit on the head pretty hard," Rollan said as soon as Jehan left. "You should have Jhi take a look at you. She'll help you feel better."

Meilin nodded, but glanced around the room. No one else was with them. "Where are the others?" she whispered, already trying to think of a means to escape.

"Conor and Anka are being guarded in another tent," Rollan answered. "You were brought here because you were in bad shape last night. I talked Jehan into letting me stay here, too."

"I'm sure it took a lot of convincing," Meilin muttered.

"Huh?" Rollan scrunched his eyebrows together. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing." Meilin wasn't sure *what* she meant, or what she was feeling exactly. "How about Abeke? Is she free?"

"Sort of," he replied. "We challenged the Dasat to a hunting contest. If Abeke wins, then ..." Rollan stopped talking as Jehan whipped open the fabric covering the tent's entrance and stepped inside.

"You both need to stay here," she ordered, her face very stern.

"What's happened?" Rollan asked. "Something's changed."

Jehan didn't answer him. "Just do as I say and I'll be back soon. My guards will be here with your breakfast in a few minutes." She looked at the honey badger. "Livora, we need to go." She held out her hand and the honey badger darted toward her, disappearing and then reappearing as a tattoo on her wrist.

"Something's happening," Rollan observed. "You need to have Jhi get you back to full strength. We may need to move quick."



Within the hour, Jhi had Meilin feeling better. Rollan apprised her of everything that had happened since her injury. The panda was still licking Meilin's head when a flurry of activity outside made Jhi stop. Meilin sat up, ready for action.

Outside, loud cheers erupted as the tent panels were thrust open and a guard entered carrying a basket of vines and grasses. "These are for the Great Panda," he said, placing the basket in the corner. He watched curiously as Jhi ambled over.

"What's going on outside?" Meilin asked.

The guard smiled. "We've received the signal that one of the hunters is returning. Come." He walked over to the tent panel and pulled it open. "I don't think there's any harm for you to see who won." He glanced at Jhi chewing on a vine. "But your spirit animal should stay here."

"I don't think you can tear her away from her breakfast," Rollan said, offering his arm to Meilin as she stood up.

"I got it," Meilin said, waving him off.

"I have a bad feeling about this," he whispered.

Shuffling their feet because their ankles were still chained together, Meilin and Rollan went outside. A short distance away, Meilin spotted Conor and Anka standing in front of a tent.

"Meilin!" Anka shouted and lurched forward before stumbling to a halt. Her ankle was chained to one of the tent posts. "You're fine?"

"I am!" Meilin answered.

Anka's face was awash with relief. Meilin could tell how concerned she'd been about her. It was good to have friends who cared so deeply.

"Nice to have you back!" Conor shouted.

"Look." Rollan pointed to a large man carrying a gazelle over his shoulder. The man was being congratulated by several people. "It's Khai, the hunter I told you about."

“Abeke lost?” Meilin was shocked. Abeke was the best hunter she knew.

Khai dropped the gazelle on a wooden pallet as Jehan rushed out from one of the tents. She had a serious look on her face.

“Jehan, I have brought victory once again, but I must tell you—”

“Later. I need to talk to you inside,” Jehan declared, apparently uninterested in the details of Khai’s hunt.

Khai’s expression quickly changed. He scanned the camp, his eyes locking on Meilin. Something was wrong, but it seemed only Jehan knew what it was.

“Khai, tell us the story of your victory!” one of the guards shouted.

Khai gave him a slight smile and waved. “Not now,” he said as others began to sense the unease that permeated the air. The time for hunting challenges was apparently over.

“We need to escape,” Meilin whispered. “They’re planning something.”

Rollan nodded in agreement.

Just then the sound of a ram’s horn being blown in the distance made everyone in the camp stop what they were doing. A second bellowing sound quickly followed.

“Intruders! Take your positions!” a guard yelled, and everyone rushed to grab a weapon.

“Now’s our chance!” Meilin looked back at Jhi, who was chomping away at a bushel of leaves.

But Jehan was already running toward them. “We’re setting you free,” she announced. “You must leave the camp at once and not return.” She pulled out a key and unlocked the shackle around each of their ankles.

“Why? What’s happening?” Rollan asked. Across the camp, Khai was releasing Conor and Anka as well.

“The people you call the Oathbound ... they’re approaching from the mountains on the other side of the

valley." She turned to one of the guards. "Bring them their bags," she instructed, then hustled to grab her own sword and a quiver full of arrows.

"This doesn't make sense," Meilin whispered as the camp emptied out and Conor and Anka rushed over. "Why wouldn't she turn us over to the Oathbound?"

Rollan shrugged; he seemed as perplexed as Meilin.

"What's going on around here?" a familiar voice shouted.

Abeke entered the nearly desolate camp, her face and clothes covered in dust. Meilin noticed that she was carrying a dead hyena over her shoulder, but they had bigger problems now.

"The Oathbound are coming," Conor replied. He pulled on his cloak and tightened the holster that once again carried his ax.

"And for some reason the Dasat have decided to let us go," Anka added.

"If you'd rather we turn you over to the Oathbound, that can still be arranged." Jehan had returned, holding a small vial in her hand. "Although Khai argued against it." She looked at Abeke. "He told me what you and your spirit animal did. You've proven yourself a worthy friend to the Dasat, and so the challenge is considered a tie. We are granting you passage through our land."

"Jehan!" Khai called out from a mountain ridge. "We await your orders."

"Here." Jehan handed Abeke the glass tube, filled with a scarlet substance. "This is the demon tree sap. Take it and go quickly. We will delay the Oathbound."

"I'm not sure what to say, except thank you." Abeke glanced up at Khai, who raised his hand in recognition.

Anka had already faded from sight and Conor had called out Briggan, who stood proudly next to him. His silver fur glistened in the morning sun.

“Hopefully the Oathbound won’t be interested in the Dasat. If pressed, you can say we escaped,” Conor suggested.

Jehan laughed. “That is something no one would believe.” She turned to Rollan. “Last night, you mentioned that you were seeking the edge of the land. I think I know what that is. Follow me.” Jehan took a few steps with Rollan while Livora scuttered behind them. Jehan pointed to a plateau in the distance. “The flat top of that mountain has an overlook. When viewed from a certain angle, it gives the impression that the world beneath you ends. It can feel like you’re at the edge of the land. That might be where you need to go.”

Rollan nodded. “Thank you,” he said. “That’s a big help.”

“All right.” Meilin joined them. She was feeling antsy. They were spending too much time with all this chitchat. “We need to get moving before the Oathbound arrive.”

Livora opened her mouth, revealing her sharp teeth, and hissed at Meilin.

Meilin glared at the honey badger. The dislike was mutual.

Jehan placed her hand on Rollan’s arm and drew closer. “I believe you’re a friend of the Dasat, and I hope you choose to return one day. You’ll be welcomed here.”

“I’d like that,” Rollan said as Meilin tugged on his sleeve.

“We have to hurry,” Meilin urged. They couldn’t afford to waste any more time. Jhi had already gone into passive state, and Uraza had rejoined the group. They needed to get away from the approaching Oathbound. Plus, if Meilin was honest with herself, she simply didn’t like the way Jehan was speaking to Rollan.

“Of course. I, too, have to go.” Jehan sprinted off to join Khai and the others, who were headed in the opposite direction. “Good luck!” she shouted back. “May Fate and Skill be with you.”

Meilin scowled. This Dasat girl was annoying. But what she'd said was true enough. They would need fate, skill, and a lot of luck to complete their mission of regaining the Greencloaks' good name.



## STORM'S WRATH

CONOR AND THE OTHER GREENCLOAKS HURRIED TO reach the plateau that Jehan had shown Rollan. Even if the Dasat slowed down the Oathbound, there was no time to spare. The Greencloaks hiked for most of the day over grueling, uneven terrain and crossed fast, slippery streams, while the blazing sun of Nilo beat down on them. By the time the group reached their final climb, the day had grown cloudy and a heavy fog rolled over everything except the tops of the mountain range. Visibility soon dropped to the point where Conor could only see Briggan if he was right next to him; otherwise the wolf simply disappeared into the mist.

"You think these are the clouds we're supposed to walk through?" Conor asked. He knew his friends were nearby, but he couldn't see anything except the gray haze.

"What?" Abeke called out from somewhere in the mist.

"The ones in Tembo's message," Conor said. "Didn't it say that after we passed the valley of death and got the demon's blood, we'd have to go through some clouds to arrive at the edge of the land?"

"It did," Meilin answered. "And Tembo said the queen's glory would then be revealed. I can't imagine he'd make us come all the way out here if he wasn't referring to Stormspeaker as the queen's glory."

From high above them, Conor heard Essix screech.

"Keep going," Rollan called out. "We're almost out of all this fog. It gets clearer as we near the top."

Rollan was right. As Conor hiked higher up the mountain, the fog began to thin out. A few minutes later, he pulled himself over the top of a ridge and saw the flat vastness of the plateau. Stretching out in every direction was an almost barren landscape, punctuated with a few trees that seemed to rise out of the rocks. Conor tilted his head skyward to admire the streaks of purples, pinks, and oranges that the setting sun was creating.

"Look at this!" Anka called out, standing near the eastern edge of the plateau. "I think we're definitely in the right place!"

Conor and the others raced over and saw what she meant. There was a sharp drop-off that disappeared into the blanket of clouds, which covered everything up to the horizon. Without mountains to obstruct the view, it seemed as if they were floating above the world.

"It's like Tembo said," Conor whispered. "We're standing on the edge of the land, above the clouds." The beauty of the scene awed him.

"Want to spread out while we still have a little bit of light?" Meilin asked, breaking the mood. "We can cover more area that way, and see if the 'queen's glory' is somehow revealed."

"Wait ... look." Abeke pointed to Uraza and Briggan, who were both headed in the same direction. In the distance, Essix was flying in tight circles over one spot.

"There must be something over there," Rollan said. "Let's go."

The five Greencloaks took off running. Up ahead, Uraza and Briggan were now in a full sprint. They were in a race against time. The sun had already dipped below the horizon, and a cloud-filled night meant there would be little moonlight to help them find the crown.

Abeke had dashed ahead when she suddenly stopped, whirled around, and motioned for them all to get down. Conor crouched close to the ground, squinting into the distance at what looked like a small stone building near the far edge of the plateau.

“What do you think that is?” Anka asked.

“Some sort of lookout maybe ...” Meilin took a few steps forward, keeping low to the ground.

High above, Essix squawked. She then swooped down, disappearing through one of the building’s broken windows.

Conor held his breath until the falcon popped out of another window, going back to circling the building.

“Looks like it’s empty,” Rollan said. “Essix would have warned us if someone was there.”

Abeke straightened up. “Then let’s go quickly, before we lose the last bits of daylight.”

Leaving Uraza and Briggan outside as guards, the Greencloaks entered the small stone building. Inside, Conor noticed several half-spent candles littering the floor. A wooden table had been flipped over and chairs were tossed against a far wall. A thick layer of dust and dirt covered everything.

“Who has the matches?” Rollan asked, picking up one of the candles.

“Here.” Conor had already lit a candle and carried it over.

“This place looks like it was ransacked ages ago,” Meilin remarked, while she and Abeke righted the table. “I doubt anything like a crown was left behind.”

“If it was hidden like the Heart of the Land and the Wildcat’s Claw were, then ... ” Rollan ran his fingers along the wall, searching for a lever or notch that might reveal a secret compartment. “Maybe whoever was here before couldn’t find it.”

“Well, we’re definitely in the right place.” Abeke took one of the lit candles and walked to a corner alcove. She illuminated a statue carved into one of the stone walls, of a woman with her hands cupped in front of her. “I’m pretty sure this is supposed to be Nefrini.” Abeke looked around at the sparseness of the building. “I think this might be more of a shrine than a lookout post.”

Conor brought his own candle and added to the light in the alcove. He blew some of the dust off the wall beneath the statue, where something had been etched into the stone. “There’s writing here.”

Meilin and Rollan walked over and the alcove flickered with the lights of the candles. The shadows cast by the Greencloaks danced across the stones. Conor used the bottom of his shirt to wipe more of the dust off the carving.

Anka read it out loud. *“The storm’s wrath has no mercy until hands drip with the blood of demons and ancestors.”*

“Whoa,” Rollan muttered, stepping back. “Hands dripping with the blood of demons and ancestors ... Even knowing it means tree sap, that really does not sound good. If you ask me, I think Tembo had a little too much flair for the dramatic.”

Abeke reached up and wiped the dust off the statue. “Maybe it has nothing to do with Stormspeaker.”

“Right.” Conor rolled his eyes. “It’s just a warm and fuzzy bedtime story.” Everyone turned and stared at him. “Sorry ... guess I’m just a little tired.” He walked to the window and gazed into the pitch-black night. There was no glass in the window frame and a soft breeze swept over his head, rustling his hair into his face. He brushed it away, his

fingers lingering over the mark on his forehead. He couldn't help thinking about what Naveb had said ... that the Wyrm had changed him ... set him apart from the others, making him see things differently than they did.

Perhaps he should be thinking about their mission in a different way. Would devoting himself to fixing the things in Eura that the Greencloaks had destroyed while under the Wyrm's control be such a bad thing?

Conor glanced behind him at the others, still scanning the stone building for clues. He shook his head, dispensing with his own question. No, he loved his homeland, but the Greencloaks served everyone equally. And he couldn't imagine fighting against any of his friends.

Abeke, Meilin, and Rollan ... each of them was so different from Conor, and from each other. They were from far-flung corners of Erdas, but the Greencloaks had brought them together to help. They *had* to regain the Greencloaks' good name, to show the world that it was possible for every nation to unite under a common banner.

He placed his hands on the windowsill, leaned forward, and took a deep breath.

*CLICK!*

The frame dropped about an inch and Conor jumped back. He heard a rumbling from outside and the building began to shake. Something had been triggered.

"What did you do?" Meilin's eyes darted around the room as the candles on the table began to wobble.

"Nothing!" Conor rushed over and picked up a candle before it toppled over. "I leaned against the windowsill and something clicked."

The soft breeze blew stronger. With every passing second it picked up more dust, sand, and dirt. Suddenly, a burst of air shot through the building, blowing out all the candles.

"I think it's a sandstorm!" Abeke shouted over the high, whistling wind that was now engulfing them.

"Or a tornado!" Rollan bellowed as the chairs tumbled against the far wall. "Get away from the windows."

Conor flung the door open and stepped outside. "BRIGGAN!" he yelled, holding out his arm as a driving rain—a downpour that hadn't been there seconds before—battered his skin. The storm was fiercer than any he had ever seen. He leaned into the wind to keep his balance and yelled again. "BRIGGAN!"

Lightning flashed overhead, and in that instant he saw both Briggan and Uraza trying to make their way toward him. Uraza was crouched low to the ground, crawling toward the building, but Briggan was stumbling and losing his footing. A storm that could stop the Great Beasts was not an ordinary storm.

"URAZA!" Abeke shouted, bracing herself in the doorway only a few feet behind Conor.

"HERE!" Conor shouted. It was a struggle just to be heard over the deafening roar that surrounded them. Another thunderbolt rocked the sky above as Briggan disappeared in a flash of his own and joined Conor as a tattoo on the back of his forearm.

A sudden gust of wind pulled the front door off its hinges, yanking Abeke from her feet and sending her tumbling to the ground. The door sailed into the night sky like a child's kite freed of its string.

"I'm fine!" Abeke called out. She braced against the storm as she stood and checked under her elbow for Uraza's tattoo.

Another lightning strike lit up the sky. Conor could see blood pouring out of a large gash over Abeke's right eye.

"You're bleeding!" Conor shouted as Abeke wiped her face.

"Get inside!" Rollan yelled, standing just inside the doorway. "None of this is normal!"

More lightning flashes followed as Conor and Abeke ran into the building, where Meilin had created a sort of barricade with the table backed into a corner.

“What do you mean by not normal?” Conor shouted over the fury of the wind and the hail that was now pelting the roof.

“All of this!” Anka yelled as they all huddled under the table. “It’s like every storm’s wrath put together!”

“No mercy from the storm’s wrath....” Abeke crawled out from the barricade. “It’s the statue!” she proclaimed. “The key to stopping the storm is there!” From her pocket she pulled out the vial of demon tree sap that Jehan had given her. “It wants this ... and my blood!”



14

## NEFRINI

**T**HE HOWLING WIND WHIPPED AROUND THE ROOM AS the roof began to buckle and lift. Abeke's idea had to work. They wouldn't be able to survive the storm's onslaught much longer ... especially if they became fully exposed to the elements outside.

Abeke faced the statue of Nefrini, the wind slapping her braids against her cheeks as she opened the glass vial. She tipped it over and let a few drops of the demon tree sap fall into the statue's cupped hands.

A ripping and cracking sound echoed as the roof began to break apart, creating a gaping hole in the ceiling. Fist-sized hail rained down into the room and lightning crackled in the dark sky above.

Abeke touched the cut over her eye, smearing her fingertips until they were wet. "My blood is the blood of Nilo!" she shouted into the wind. "The blood of our ancestors!" She smeared her hands against those of the statue, letting the demon tree sap mix with her own blood.

The battering hailstorm suddenly stopped and the wind reduced its intensity, becoming little more than a strong

breeze. There was one more flash of lightning, but with it the driving rain turned into a shower, then a trickle, until it stopped completely. The building rattled a few more times as the roof and walls adjusted to the sudden calm. A thick fog like the one they'd climbed through to reach the top of the plateau filtered in through the windows and torn roof.

"You did it!" Conor exclaimed. He pushed the table out of the way and picked up a battered candle from the floor.

"Do you think a spirit is going to speak to us again?" Meilin rolled her hand through the air, creating rivulets within the mist.

Rollan raised a candle he had lit and brought it over to Conor. "I think we're about to find out." He pointed to the concentration of fog swirling around Abeke.

Abeke spun around as the cloud of mist surrounding her slithered away and took the shape of a woman.

"Is that who we think it is?" Conor asked.

Abeke said nothing. If this was Nefrini, then she deserved reverence. Speaking out of turn would not be wise. Plus, if their prior experiences with the bond tokens were any indication, then only those born on the continent would be able to communicate with the spirit. That meant only she would be able to hear Nefrini's words.

"Is she saying anything?" Rollan asked.

Abeke put a finger to her lips.

"Maybe you should introduce yourself," Meilin suggested.

Abeke shook her head. Instead, she took a seat on the floor. A hunter had to be patient sometimes.

A minute passed, then two.

As the others lit more candles, creating a warm glow within the room, the fog congealed even more, revealing the woman's regal stature and kind face. There was no doubt this was Nefrini, and she was gazing down at Abeke.

*Daughter of Nilo.* Nefrini had a soft, gentle voice that bounced around inside Abeke's head. *You have stirred my slumber. What is it that you seek?*

Abeke glanced over at her friends, who were oblivious to what was being said. Nefrini was speaking only to her.

"High Chieftess Nefrini, we are here for Stormspeaker."

*Of course you are. But why should it be entrusted to you? You are children. What have you done to deserve it?*

"My friends and I, we are Greencloaks and have saved Erdas twice. But our existence as a group is being threatened. We must show that through our unity we can best serve everyone. Long ago, your bond token was given to us as a symbol of this unity, along with three others from across Erdas. The Greencloaks hid the tokens, wary of their power being misused, but present circumstances require us to retrieve all four."

*I see.* Nefrini floated past Abeke and paused in front of the other Greencloaks before returning to Abeke. *Bond tokens reflect the epitome of trust. Do you believe that these allies of yours are honest and true?*

"I do," Abeke answered without hesitation.

*And do they feel the same about you?* Nefrini asked.

Abeke turned to her friends. "She wants to know if you trust me to be honest and true."

"Yes!" they all proclaimed in unison.

Nefrini nodded in approval. Then a curl of mist flowed out from the spirit, wrapping itself around Abeke's wrist. Not of her own volition, Abeke felt herself flipping over her arm to reveal the leopard tattoo.

*Your spirit animal is Uraza,* Nefrini observed, letting go of Abeke's arm. *The Great Beast chose you as her human partner.... That is very telling.*

Abeke remained quiet.

*I, too, had an incredible bond with my spirit animal,* she mused. *Nazir, my hammerkop, was with me when I lost my*

*mother and when my son was born. She gave me a perspective on life like no one else. We were inseparable.*

Abeke glanced at her tattoo. She wanted to think that way about her bond with Uraza, but Zerif had separated them for a while and pitted the two against each other. The pain of that time was still a thorn in Abeke's heart.

*Nefrini bent down to get a closer look at Abeke. I can tell that you are a hunter by nature, but I also sense the power of the Rain Dancer flowing through your bond. The Rain Dancer tradition was our gift to Nilo. I'm pleased to see it survives.*

"You were a Rain Dancer?" Abeke asked.

*Nefrini nodded. The first. Though truly it was Nazir's craft. And when we created our token, we gave a bit of that power to the land of Nilo itself. Bonds formed here are special. Some are touched by my old friend's gift. In that way, she lives forever.*

*Nefrini paused, studying Abeke for a moment. In life, as with a hunt, you must always perceive what surrounds you. In front, beside, and behind.*

Abeke nodded in agreement. It was similar to what Naveb had told her.

*Prepare for the future by observing the present and understanding the past.* She turned without warning and pointed both fog-filled arms toward the statue. Her fingertips emanated a brilliant blue light.

"What is she—?" Abeke heard Conor begin to ask, when a single lightning bolt shot out from Nefrini's hands, hitting the statue and shattering it into dozens of pieces that went flying across the room.

"Whoa!" Meilin exclaimed as the Greencloaks all jumped against the wall.

*Go to where the statue was, Nefrini instructed. My crown is yours to use.*

Abeke quickly stepped over the broken pieces of stone strewn along the floor. Pressed against the wall was a simple gold headdress with wings on either side. A bird holding a green gem. Abeke chiseled the crown out with her fingertips.

“Stormspeaker,” Abeke whispered, the crown glimmering in the candlelight. “Thank you.”

“She’s disappearing!” Rollan called out.

Abeke turned back to Nefrini. The chieftess had begun to fade, the fog dispersing into the atmosphere.

“Your Highness … please wait!” Abeke called out. “I have questions.”

*I’m sure you do, daughter of Nilo. Questions are good, and you should always seek answers. But I’m afraid my time here is over,* Nefrini explained.

“But the crown … what does it do?” Abeke said, holding the golden diadem in her hand. “How do I use it?”

*You have already witnessed its power. Use it wisely. But you must be careful, there is—*

“Ask her where the Dragon’s Eye is!” Anka said, interrupting Nefrini. “She has to tell us before she goes!”

Abeke noticed the last traces of fog shift to look at Anka. Although there wasn’t much definition of Nefrini left in the mist, Abeke thought she saw the woman scowl.

Then she was gone. A gentle breeze once again reclaimed the air, and everything was silent for a few seconds.

“So?” Rollan asked. “What did she say? Did she tell you how to use it? How about where the Dragon’s Eye is hidden?”

“There wasn’t time,” Abeke said with a sigh. “We’ll have to go back to the monastery and just hope that Tembo left another clue there.” Abeke inspected the gold crown in her hand, turning it slowly to see every side. “I think it controls the weather.... That’s why it’s called Stormspeaker.”

"You're still bleeding," Meilin said, drawing closer to Abeke and looking at the gash over her eye. "I can ask Jhi to help you."

Abeke sat down. Her head was beginning to throb, although she wasn't sure if it was from the blow or from having Nefrini speak through her thoughts.

Jhi appeared in the room and immediately approached Abeke. The large panda pulled Abeke into a cradling embrace and gave her two quick licks over her eye.

"Panda spit works every time," Rollan said with a smile.

"We should stay the night here and get some rest." Conor unpacked his bag and laid out several items on the table. "In the morning, we can head back to the monastery."

"What if the Oathbound are still there?" Abeke asked, keeping the cut eye closed as Jhi stroked her head with her soft, furry paw.

"They've likely moved on by now," Anka said. "The Oathbound probably left and formed search parties to look for us."

Abeke glanced at Anka. Her clothes and skin had blended into the floor, but Abeke could see her shadow curled up like a cat in the corner of the room. Her thoughts went to Uraza.

She released the Great Beast. Uraza quickly evaluated her injured partner and purred with concern, rubbing her nose against Abeke's leg. "I'm fine," Abeke whispered into the leopard's ear. She then rolled away from Jhi to prove her point.

"Anka's right." Rollan stretched out his arms and cracked his knuckles before lying down on the stone floor. "The Oathbound will be on patrol, but Essix can help us scout the area. We just have to travel quick. We'll leave at first light."

"Look who's giving orders now," Meilin muttered under her breath.

“And once we get the Dragon’s Eye we can head back to Eura and retrieve the Wildcat’s Claw,” Conor added, curling up against Briggan. “We just have to be careful.”

*Be careful.*

The words reverberated in Abeke’s head. It was what Nefrini had said before disappearing, but she hadn’t had a chance to finish her warning.

“All in all, getting Stormspeaker wasn’t too bad.” Rollan leaned against the corner wall. “Jehan really did point us in the right direction, and we haven’t seen any Oathbound the whole way.”

“Hmpf ...” Meilin scoffed at his statement and lay next to Jhi. “Only if you consider being attacked by wild hyenas, captured by the Dasat, fleeing from the Oathbound, and surviving a supernatural storm to be *not too bad*.”

Rollan shrugged. “Compared to what we’ve gone through in the past ... it certainly wasn’t the worst. We’re all still here, together.”

Abeke smiled. Rollan was right. This hadn’t been so bad. It seemed they’d figured out how to give the Oathbound the slip.

Perhaps the worst was truly over.



## CAVE DWELLER

**R**OLLAN COULDN'T BELIEVE HOW FORTUNATE THEY were. The Greencloaks had been traveling back to the monastery for two days, only stopping for a few hours at night to rest, and they hadn't encountered any Oathbound, hyenas, or other troublemakers. They'd made good time with Essix flying overhead, scouting the mountains for potential problems and directing them along the shortest possible route.

"Essix is taking a lot longer than usual, isn't she?" Meilin scanned the sky. "It's been at least an hour since we've seen her."

Rollan grimaced. The open expanse of the savannah stretched before them. With only a couple of hours of daylight left, he didn't like the idea of being out in the open without Essix giving them the all clear. "I think we should wait to cross. She'll be back soon enough. Plus, crossing the savannah at night is probably safer."

"Actually, night is when most predators are active," Abeke reminded him, taking a seat on a nearby rock. "Hyenas and lions and all sorts of beasts. We'll still have to be careful."

"Let me see if I can connect with Essix," Rollan suggested. He closed his eyes and let his mind drift. Soon he sensed the falcon's keen vision within his mind and he could see through her eyes. However, the usual sensation of flying, of gliding through the air, was missing. Rollan quickly noticed that Essix was perched in an acacia tree, close to the base of the mountain.

The falcon turned her head, focused on a nearby cave opening, and took off toward it. Flying through the narrow entrance, Essix beat back her wings, landing gingerly on the gravel-covered ground. Taking several steps deeper into the cave, Essix stared at a figure sitting in a corner wearing a hooded cloak.

Slowly, the person lifted off the hood and smiled.

"It's Xanthe!" Rollan told the others. "Essix found her. She's not too far from here."

"Is she alone?" Anka asked.

"Or hurt?" Abeke followed up.

"No one else is there, and she seems fine." Rollan concentrated on his connection with Essix. Xanthe was saying something, but Rollan couldn't tell what it was. He felt Essix turn her head and fly out of the cave. Once again, the freedom of being in the air, the land rushing along beneath her wings, filled Rollan's spirit. He was one with Essix, but the connection couldn't last much longer. Already he felt light-headed.

He opened his eyes and regained his bearings.

"Well, what happened?" Meilin asked as Rollan took a deep breath and sat on the ground.

"I think Xanthe is waiting for night before she crosses the savannah," he said. "She was saying something to Essix, but I don't know what it was."

"So let's go find her." Abeke shook the dust off her cloak. "We can all travel together."

Essix screeched, circling overhead.

“She got here fast.” Rollan pulled out a piece of jerky from his bag and lifted it in the air. Essix dove down and snatched it from his hand. “Means we don’t have to go too far. Xanthe is probably hiding nearby.”

Briggan led the group around the base of the mountain, following Essix’s flight path high above. Uraza had disappeared once again, out scouring the area for Oathbound, hyenas, or another meal. It didn’t take long before Rollan recognized the acacia tree where Essix had been perched.

“We’re close,” Rollan announced.

“I’m going up there.” Meilin pointed to a small ridge above the cave. “I’ll be a lookout in case the Oathbound decide to come our way.”

“Want some company?” Rollan offered, sensing that something had been bothering Meilin ever since they’d left the Dasat camp. He just didn’t know what it was.

“Sure,” Meilin replied, then turned away from him. “Anka … why don’t you come with me?”

Rollan felt a wave of disappointment. He was certain he hadn’t done anything wrong, but it felt as if there were a wedge growing between the two of them.

“Already climbing,” Anka said, her barely visible form blending against the rocks.

“Briggan found something.” Conor pointed to the wolf standing at the mouth of the cave.

“We’ll switch in a little while,” Abeke offered Meilin. “So you can rest up before we cross the savannah tonight.”

“Sure,” Meilin called down.

Conor, Abeke, and Rollan approached the cave cautiously, but Briggan seemed at ease and lay down at the entrance. Rollan stepped around the wolf and, as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw Xanthe sitting on the floor with the hood of her cloak pulled back. Her white hair shone with the bit of sunlight that reflected inside the cave.

"Hi, strangers," she greeted them all with a smile. "Had a feeling you might show up after Essix's visit. I got this far and then started to worry about you guys. Figured I'd stick around to see that you all made it back safe." She peered around the three of them. "Where's Meilin and Anka?"

"They're right above us." Rollan pointed up. "Keeping watch from the ridge."

"And Uraza's out there enjoying Nilo," Abeke added. "Hopefully, keeping an eye out for any trouble until we get back to the monastery."

Xanthe's face lit up. "Does that mean you found Stormspeaker? Is that why you're heading back?"

"Yep. We sure did." Conor dropped the bag he'd been carrying and sat next to Xanthe.

"Can I see it?" Xanthe looked over at his bag.

"It's in Meilin's bag," Abeke said quickly.

Rollan glanced at Abeke, who didn't return his gaze. He knew that Abeke had the crown, but for some reason she didn't want to show it to Xanthe. Maybe she was right, and they should keep it as hidden as possible for now.

"Um ... yeah." Conor fidgeted a little with the strap of his own bag. "So we're going back to the monastery in case Takoda's discovered something about the Dragon's Eye."

"But what if he hasn't?" Xanthe asked. "What's the plan then?"

Abeke's lie about the location of the crown was causing Rollan to rethink what was discussed with Xanthe. It wasn't anything against her personally, but Rollan knew it was dangerous to divulge too much information, for Xanthe and them. "We're not sure," Rollan said. "We'll have to cross that bridge once we get to it."

"But you have to start thinking of where else to look," Xanthe continued. "I mean, Tembo may have only left clues to Stormspeaker. You should try to see if there's a pattern to where the other tokens were found."

"We're looking into it." Abeke took a seat on the gravel floor. "So tell us about the last few days. Have you run into any problems? Seen any Oathbound?"

"Not really," Xanthe replied. "I've been moving at night and it's been pretty quiet." She studied the three Greencloaks. "But back to the last token ... do you think it's still in Nilo?"

Rollan knew that they had to be honest with Xanthe. She deserved nothing less. "Xanthe, I think it's best if certain things are kept between Greencloaks. You understand, right?"

"Oh, that again. Sure." Xanthe nodded, but her mouth tightened. "Guess I keep forgetting that I'm not one of you, so I can't be trusted," she mumbled.

"It's not that," Conor replied. "We've all just been through a lot, so we're a little ... cautious."

"Uh-huh." Xanthe eyed him carefully, lingering on the faded mark on his forehead. It was a reminder that she'd seen him at his worst and still trusted him. "Don't forget that I've been through a lot, too. In fact ... you were there when it happened."

"We know," Abeke said softly. "And we appreciate everything you've done and are doing. But ..." She sighed. "The less you know, the better. We don't want to put you in any more harm."

Xanthe rolled her eyes. "Riiiight. You're being secretive for my benefit. It's like what everyone warned me about."

Rollan didn't like the way that sounded. "What do you mean?"

Xanthe leaned against the wall. "People talk about how the Greencloaks think they're superior, how you think you know what's best for everyone. I've heard the stories about what happened with the Nectar and all the problems that brought. I just hope you aren't repeating the same mistakes."

The silence inside the cave was deafening, but no one had a good response. Rollan wanted to say that he too hoped they weren't making a mistake, but admitting that didn't seem like a good idea. So the four of them just sat quietly until one by one they each drifted off to sleep. A late-afternoon nap was a luxury they normally didn't enjoy.



"Fire! In the distance!" Meilin's words startled everyone.

"What?" Xanthe rushed to the cave entrance, where Briggan was sniffing the air. The sun was still out, but it was hovering over the horizon. "Where?"

"A little bit to the west," Meilin answered. "And it has to be pretty big, based on the amount of smoke."

Xanthe pulled up her hood and marched outside. Even with the sun so low in the sky, she had to squint. But Rollan could see the horror in her expression.

"It's the monastery," she said in quiet disbelief.

"No." Conor shook his head, not wanting to believe what he was seeing.

"It's got to be the Oathbound's doing." Rollan stared at the plume of dark black smoke rising in the distance. "They're burning the place down!"

Xanthe turned to the others, her pale face grave. "Takoda is there. We have to help him ... all of them."

"Hold on." Abeke opened her bag. "I have an idea." She pulled out the gold crown and flipped it over gently in her hands.

"Is that ... wait, I thought Meilin had it in her—" Xanthe stopped herself and crossed her arms across her chest. "Oh, right. Never mind."

"Xanthe, please understand. I think I can help Takoda and the monastery," Abeke said, placing Nefrini's crown on her head. "*This* is what the Greencloaks do ... help others."

Meilin looked at Xanthe and then Abeke. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," they both answered in unison.

Rollan moved closer to Abeke. "You sure about this?" he asked. "We aren't totally certain what this can do. Remember how that storm nearly pried the roof off?"

Abeke nodded. "I have to try. Now stand back." She closed her eyes, then opened one. "Better yet, go back in the cave."

Rollan and the others moved just inside the cave's entrance, watching as Abeke stood still. She closed her eyes again and tilted her head slightly back, facing the sky.

At first there was only quiet. Then, the small rustling of wind as menacing clouds formed suddenly overhead. Darkness shrouded the area, and the air grew cool, then cold. Rollan poked his head out as a strong gust of wind whipped by the cave and a dust storm swirled around Abeke. Thunder rumbled overhead. A few fat raindrops hit a nearby boulder, leaving tracks along the side of the dusty rock.

Abeke squeezed her eyes tighter.

The raindrops increased and fell to the earth in drumlike beats, yet Abeke remained dry. The rain and wind seemed to purposefully avoid her.

"You have to send the clouds across the savannah. It does no good here!" Xanthe exclaimed. "The fire is over there."

Abeke silently nodded, but the storm clouds didn't budge.

The rain slowed to a light trickle and then to an almost invisible misting of water.

The wind fluttered to a stop and the clouds parted, once again revealing the setting sun.

Abeke frowned into the sky as her shoulders drooped. "It won't move," she said.

Xanthe burst out from the cave entrance, pointing toward the smoke. "You have to try again. You have to!"

"I can't," Abeke rasped. "Nothing happens. It only stays overhead."

"Then we'll have to take the storm there ourselves." Xanthe pulled up the hood of her cloak. "Let's go!"



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## THE RETURN

**M**EILIN ENTERED THE TAABARA CHASM WITH HER sword drawn, ready to battle any Oathbound guards who might be lurking in the shadows. They had crossed the savannah under a cloud-filled night sky. The darkness shrouded them from any sentries keeping watch, but this place would be different. The deep crater was striped with land bridges and crevices where the Oathbound could be lying in wait for them.

“Keep alert,” Xanthe whispered, leading the group to the bottom of the chasm. “Our luck may not hold much longer.”

But everything was quiet.

“I don’t think anyone’s here.” Abeke spun around, her arrow nocked and ready to fly. “Isn’t that a bit strange?”

“It’s very strange.” Rollan looked up at Essix, who had given them the all clear. “You’d think someone would be guarding this place. At the very least guarding the fissure that leads to the monastery.”

“The Oathbound may have everyone at the monastery,” Anka said, approaching the entrance to the fissure.

“Perhaps they didn’t expect us to come back. If we hear or see anything, get close to me. I’ll camouflage us.”

“I think I should go first,” Xanthe suggested. “I’ll be the best at spotting someone in the dark, especially if they’re on the other side where the rope ladders are.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Meilin concurred. “I’ll bring up the rear, in case we get a surprise attack from behind.”

“Then let’s go.” Rollan waved his arm at Essix and pointed to the crevasse. The falcon would be waiting for them on the other side.

As quickly as possible, the group made their way through the narrowing passageway. Before long, they were forced to shuffle through it sideways. Meilin reluctantly sheathed her sword. There was no room to fight at this point.

“Do you smell it?” Rollan whispered. He’d slowed down to get closer to Meilin.

“The smoke?” she answered, taking a long sniff of the air. “Yes, it’s getting stronger.”

“No,” Rollan said. “The smell of victory. The Oathbound have no idea what we have in store for them.”

Meilin rolled her eyes. She couldn’t see him in the darkness, but she knew Rollan was smiling. He was always trying to lighten the mood and be the funny man. This time it bothered her.

“You don’t always have to make jokes,” she said. “It’s okay to be serious once in a while.”

“I can be serious,” Rollan replied. “Not my fault if I’m just naturally likable.”

“Yeah, apparently you are *very* likable.” Meilin hadn’t meant to sound caustic, but her feelings betrayed her.

“What are you talking about?” Rollan stopped shuffling through the crevasse. “You’ve been acting strange ever since we left the Dasat camp. What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Meilin nudged him to keep moving, but he stayed still. They weren’t going anywhere until they finished this conversation. Meilin sighed. “I just find it weird that Jehan was so friendly to you and invited you to come back after only knowing you for a day.”

“Is that it?” Rollan chuckled. “You’re jealous?”

“What? No.” Meilin scoffed at the suggestion. “It just seems unusual.”

“Well, like I said, I am a very likable guy.”

Meilin could hear the snicker in his voice.

“Forget it.” Meilin pushed him again, but he stood firm.

“Meilin.” His voice took a softer tone. “I think Jehan was just impressed because I was able to shift the whole mountain for you. That’s all.”

“Wait, what?” Meilin couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing. Rollan had moved an entire mountain for her?

“Yeah, well, I just knew I had to help you no matter what, so I used the Heart of the Land to create a ledge for you to land on. I guess I should’ve mentioned that before, but ... I don’t know ... I just didn’t.”

Meilin didn’t know what to say. She’d always believed that feelings and emotions weren’t supposed to come into play when on a mission, but everything with Rollan was different. She was experiencing feelings that she normally kept under control. Even little bits of jealousy.

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Rollan broke the ice. “Yeah, well, you took care of me when I had the Sunset Death ... couldn’t let you continue to hold that over me. Had to do something to get us on equal footing.”

Meilin tried to see Rollan’s features in the darkness of the crevasse, but she could only see his silhouette. She reached over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks,” she whispered.

Rollan was about to say something when Conor interrupted with a loud “PSSSST!”

"Come on." Rollan gave Meilin a tug. "We'll talk more later."

They hurried over and caught up to the others.

"Xanthe says the ledge is up ahead," Anka whispered, relaying the message. "And there are two Oathbound on it."

"Let's do this," Rollan said.

"We're ready," Meilin confirmed.

Abeke put on the crown and sat down. It had been decided that Anka would stay with her, in case she needed to be camouflaged while the others fought the guards.

Everyone held their breaths as Abeke concentrated on bringing about a storm. The idea was to have it rain hard enough to put out the fire in the monastery. Then, with the first crack of lightning, the others would launch an attack on the guards, with the thunder masking the sounds of the fight. Timing would be critical.

The air stirred as a cool breeze filtered into the crevasse.

A few raindrops hit Meilin on the head. She pulled up her hood and unsheathed her sword. The downpour was about to begin.

A sudden storm deluged the area. The rain fell hard as the clouds rumbled above them.

Lightning flashed suddenly between the clouds overhead, illuminating the sky into shades of black, blue, and dark purple. This was it.

Xanthe, Conor, Meilin, and Rollan ran out from the crevasse, barreling into the guards as thunder boomed around them.

A swift kick to the knee. An elbow to the jaw. The pommel of Meilin's sword sideswiping a guard's head.

And silence.

It was over as quickly as it had begun.

In less than a moment, two Oathbound guards were knocked out and Conor was tying them up.

"Go, quickly," Xanthe whispered, grabbing one of the rope ladders that led up to monastery. "We don't have much time."

The group climbed up to the higher level, swiftly and silently. Once they'd scaled the overhang, they hid behind a row of thorny bushes that lined the edge of the cliff. Peering out between the leaves, they could assess what was going on in the monastery. There were Oathbound soldiers moving past the upper windows, but only one guard patrolled the raised iron gate at the front.

"Over there," Conor whispered, pointing to a smoldering part of the building. "Looks like that's what they were burning."

"It's part of the library," Xanthe explained. "Takoda would never allow that to be destroyed without putting up a fight." Her voice faltered. "I—I should never have left. My place was with him...."

Meilin put a hand on Xanthe's shoulder. She knew Xanthe had seen her people overrun by the Many during their battle with Wyrm, and had fought hard for them. "I'm sure he's all right. Takoda is smart and brave. We'll find him and beat the Oathbound."

"Is the main door the only way in?" Abeke asked, slipping on the gold headdress. "Because I can create a diversion—distract the guard with a windstorm or something."

Xanthe nodded. "Other than those upper windows, it's the—"

"Shh." Meilin pointed to the monastery's entrance. A broad-shouldered, bald man dressed all in black was talking to the guard.

"I know who that is," Anka whispered. "He was at the Citadel when the emperor was killed. They called him Sid the Generous, so I'm guessing that means he'd steal the crumbs from a street urchin's plate. No offense, Rollan."

Rollan snorted. "As if we had anything as fancy as *plates*."

"You are all idiots!" Sid yelled to a group of warriors who had joined him by the iron gate. "Something is going on. Or am I the only one who can sense it?"

Meilin and the others froze.

"Everyone, hold hands," Anka whispered. "I'll hide us." She interlocked her fingers with Conor, causing his arms to blend into the variegated colors of the bushes.

"All of us?" Meilin asked, knowing that Anka's abilities had their limit.

"I can do it ... trust me," she replied as everyone joined hands.

But the progression was worryingly sluggish. First Conor slowly disappeared, and then Xanthe's skin blistered into leafy green rashes. Meilin could no longer see Anka, but she heard the elder Greencloak whimper with effort.

Suddenly, Sid turned on his heel and scowled. He marched toward the edge of the cliff, right to where the Greencloaks were hiding. His eyes widened with fury.

Meilin sucked in a breath. *It's too late! He's seen us!*

But then she turned to Rollan and found that he'd already vanished. Meilin glanced down to where their fingers were interlaced and saw ... nothing. Thorns and roots and shrubby leaves.

An animal that looked like a small bear or very large weasel trailed right behind Sid. Meilin recognized it as a wolverine—one of the most ferocious predators in the animal kingdom. Shane had once pretended his uncle's wolverine was his own spirit animal. Meilin had seen how vicious and territorial it was. It figured that would be Sid the Generous's animal partner.

Meilin's free hand reached for the pommel of her sword. She glanced back at the sheer cliff behind them. They were

in the worst possible spot for a fight, but it didn't make a difference.

Any moment the battlefield could be declared, and they'd have to be ready to attack. She gripped the sword's handle.

It was now or never.



## SID THE GENEROUS

**T**HE WOLVERINE REARED UP ON ITS HIND LEGS, ITS NOSTRILS flaring as it moved its head from side to side. Even though they were hidden from view, it wasn't going to be enough. Conor could see that the animal was picking up their scent.

"Change the direction of the wind," Conor whispered to Abeke. "If we're downwind, it'll only be able to smell the ashes from the fire." A few seconds later the air stirred above them. Although Conor couldn't see Abeke, he assumed she was using the crown. A strong smell of smoke floated over them and down the mountain.

The wolverine fell back on its four legs and turned to face the building, where a few fires were still smoldering. The smoke was confusing it.

"Nothing?" Sid asked his spirit animal, who had apparently lost the scent.

Conor and the others stayed still, barely breathing.

Sid the Generous was not convinced. He took a few more steps toward the bushes and stared out into the night. Waiting for a sound or a movement.

Conor considered jumping him, but they'd be giving up their most valuable weapon ... the element of surprise. His prudence proved to be right; just a moment later, another small group of Oathbound emerged from the monastery.

"Sir ..." A young-looking Oathbound warrior, probably not much older than fifteen, cautiously approached Sid from behind. "Um ... one of the guards sent me to tell you that we haven't found any gold. Do you want us to keep—?"

Sid spun around and struck the boy squarely across the face with an open hand. The force from the slap knocked the young warrior to his knees. "KEEP LOOKING!" Sid bellowed. "I want results, not excuses! Now, stand up!"

The boy got up, clutching the side of his face.

Sid grabbed the young Oathbound's shirt, twisting it in one hand and hoisting him up so they were face-to-face. "Tell the guards to scour the libraries ... every single crevice. I want some gold in my bag before the captain arrives, is that understood?"

"Y-y-yes, sir," the boy stammered.

"Good!" Sid dropped the boy, who quickly turned and ran back inside the monastery. He scanned the area one more time, then motioned for the wolverine to follow him in.

Once Sid disappeared into the building, Xanthe snuck around the bush, pulling Anka along. "Stay close," she whispered.

There was no discussion. They were all going in together. But as long as they held hands and moved slowly along the stone walls, they were virtually invisible.

As they passed several rooms and corridors, Conor noticed that there were virtually no guards inside. It seemed that they were all searching for Sid's gold, and few were searching for the Greencloaks. If only they could find Takoda and the other monks, then maybe they could outnumber these Oathbound and regain control of the monastery.

"I'm done being patient!" Sid's voice roared from the Great Hall.

Staying flush against the wall and using any shadows available, the group moved as one unit until they entered the hall. In the center of the chamber, beneath the wooden trusses that crisscrossed the ceiling, stood Sid the Generous. In front of him were the monks, lined up in a row with their hands and feet tied. Sid was staring down at Master Naveb.

Conor and the others slowly inched into the room, making sure they weren't seen as they moved along the gray stone wall.

"Foolish old man," Sid sneered. "Tell me what you know."

"Untie me and see how old and foolish I am," Master Naveb said defiantly.

"Ha! Don't make me laugh!" Sid leaned closer to Master Naveb, placing both hands on the old monk's shoulders. "Don't you care that your precious Niloan history is being lost?" he asked. "Tell me where the gold is and we'll stop destroying your libraries."

"Even if I had some, I wouldn't tell a degenerate like you," Naveb said, his voice flat. He face betrayed not a hint of emotion.

Sid's eyes blazed with fury as he lashed out at Naveb, kneeing him in the stomach and knocking the old man to the floor. "This is what happens when you don't respect me." He pulled back his leg and kicked the old man with all his might.

"STOP!" several of the monks shouted.

"Leave him alone!" Takoda fought against the ropes that bound him.

"This wasn't part of the deal!" Sodu shouted from the end of the line. The young monk was also tied up, his face screwed into a scowl. "You gave me your word!"

“Deal? The deal was for the Greencloaks,” Sid sneered. “No Greencloaks, no deal.” Sid looked around the room. “And a place this vast must have its share of gold and valuable secrets.”

“Secrets? I know about a secret. What if we strike a new deal?” Sodu asked, his eyes darting over to Takoda. “How about something that’s valuable to the Greencloaks? Something called the Dragon’s Eye.”

Anka’s grip tightened around Conor’s hand. He felt his stomach turn, and a lump formed in his throat. *How does Sodu know about the final bond token? Did he stumble on the clue himself in the monastery?*

“Sodu ...” Master Naveb moaned while still on the floor. “Don’t.”

“Go on,” Sid replied.

“Takoda knows where it is,” Sodu continued, staring at the young monk. “I overheard him tell Master Naveb that he had to find a way to get word to the Greencloaks.”

“I see.” Sid raised a single eyebrow and strolled to stand in front of Takoda. “This is an interesting turn of events.” He stared in silence for several seconds, apparently weighing his options. “Seems like we might be able to help each other. I’d make it worth your while ... possibly share some of the gold with you. They don’t call me Sid the Generous for nothing.”

Takoda spat in his face.

Sid’s eyes burned. He responded with an uppercut punch to the chin that caught Takoda by surprise, dropping him to his knees.

Conor felt Xanthe flinch, but she stayed put. Any movement away from Anka would reveal her. They had to stay together and wait for the right moment.

Kovo, on the other hand, had awoken from his trance and was making his presence known. The Great Ape roared, fighting against the heavy chains that pinned him

to the wall, baring his teeth at the Oathbound who had been guarding him.

"Idiot!" Sid wiped his face with his sleeve. "I'll simply continue destroying the treasures of Nilo until you tell us where to find the Dragon's Eye and your gold." He walked around Takoda, standing behind the line of monks. "I don't understand this silence. I've shown you proof that the Sadrean girl and one of the Greencloaks have already met their deaths. Why insist on protecting their secrets?"

"Takoda, just tell him!" Sodu urged. "This will be over if you say what you know!"

Kovo suddenly stopped struggling against his chains and sniffed the air. The large gorilla's red eyes darted around the room. He quickly signed something to Takoda, who sat up and glanced curiously around.

Kovo's actions weren't lost on Sid. The Oathbound grabbed Takoda by the arm and dragged him to the center of the room. "Guards!" Sid yelled, calling out his spirit animal at the same time. "The Greencloaks are here!"

Before the Greencloaks or Xanthe could react, Sid pulled out a knife and held it to Takoda's neck. "We've been waiting for your return, Greencloaks. Reveal yourselves ... or he dies!" His eyes nervously searched the room. Standing beside Sid, the wolverine looked at the wall where Conor and the others were hidden and growled. "I give you to the count of three. One ... two ... "

Kovo roared and resumed his struggle against his chains. It was a momentary distraction, but it was all Xanthe needed. She broke away from the group, leaping out of the shadows toward Sid.

In the same instant Sid pulled another knife out from his belt and hurled it at Xanthe. The Sadrean warrior ducked but was tackled by another guard several feet before reaching Sid or Takoda.

But the knife Sid threw didn't fall to the floor.

It hung in midair for a long moment, and then the whole team's camouflage vanished, revealing their position near the back wall.

Conor turned and saw Anka, her short dark hair and cloak coming through in vibrant colors. She was completely visible, and she was clutching the knife's handle in front of her chest. A few drops of bright red blood were speckled across her shirt. Toey ran around her in a panic.

No one moved.

Not a Greencloak nor an Oathbound.

Even Sid seemed to be shocked by the apparition of the young Zhongese woman he'd just impaled.

Anka slowly pulled the knife away, revealing a growing red stain on her shirt. Her eyes dropped down to look at what the others were seeing. Stumbling, she tried to reach a table in the corner, but then her eyes locked with Meilin's.

"I'm sorry," she muttered before collapsing to the floor.

"ANKA!" Meilin cried out, but before she could run to her, Oathbound soldiers blocked her path.

"NO!" Sid yelled, pushing away the tied-up Takoda and grabbing Xanthe from the Oathbound guard. "No one move!" he yelled. "Or she also dies!"

Conor gripped the handle of his ax. One quick throw and he could lodge it into an Oathbound guard ... but then what? Sid held the ultimate card. He was holding Xanthe in a headlock, positioning her in front of him like a shield. He had the tip of his knife pressed against the pale skin of her neck, where a tiny bit of blood was already trickling out.

"Let her go!" Takoda pleaded, struggling against his ropes. "PLEASE! I'll tell you everything! Just let her go."

Kovo's chains clanged against the floor as he continued trying to get loose.

Sid took a step back, dragging Xanthe with him. "So you wouldn't do it for yourself or your fellow monks, but you'll do it for her?" He glared at Takoda as he pressed down on

the knife. "Speak quickly, because I have already lost my patience."

"Don't ..." Xanthe's voice came out a hoarse whisper. She couldn't flinch or else her throat would be cut.

"The Dragon's Eye is in the catacombs underneath Xin Kao Dai." Takoda's words tumbled out. "Beneath the Summer Palace. That's all Tembo wrote. I don't know anything else."

"See?" Sid smiled and pulled the knife away from Xanthe's throat, but tightened his grip on her. "Wasn't that easy?"

Takoda's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Now, where's the gold?" Sid asked.

"There isn't any," Takoda muttered. "I told you before. The monks never had use for it."

"I don't believe you...." Sid's eyes narrowed, trying to gauge Takoda's reaction. "But if that's true ..." He paused for a moment, smiling. "Then sadly, we have no use for her either."

With that Sid the Generous plunged the knife into Xanthe's stomach and pushed her to the ground.

"NOOOOOO!" Takoda's painful scream echoed throughout the Great Hall.

Xanthe gasped, trying to catch her breath. Her eyes were fixed on Takoda as she struggled to breathe.

Takoda wiggled his way across the floor to get closer to her, but there was nothing he could do as her eyes lost focus, closed. She stopped moving.

Takoda moaned, the noise echoing hopelessly in the expansive chamber. Hearing Takoda's raw grief, Conor felt his throat close.

"Xanthe!" Abeke cried out.

A chill ran down Conor's back.

They all feared the same thing.

Was Xanthe gone, too?



## CAPTAIN

**R**OLLAN WAS IN SHOCK. HE COULDN'T BELIEVE HIS EYES. Takoda, his feet bound and his hands still tied behind his back, was kneeling next to Xanthe, whispering something to her as she lay motionless. Sid had killed Anka and possibly Xanthe with barely a second thought. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it.

This was not the way things were supposed to go.

"Surrender or face the consequences," Sid snarled. "Because there's no way out."

"We'll see about that," Rollan replied. He'd learned on the streets of Concorba that there was usually at least one means of escape. He noticed Kovo still jerking against his chains, the ape's red eyes shining with anger. If Rollan could make it over to him, he could release the lock and unleash five hundred pounds of gorilla fury upon the Oathbound.

Sid threw back his head and laughed. "The monastery is surrounded," he said. "The four of you are completely outnumbered. And you still think there's a way out?" He laughed again.

“Greencloaks, get ready!” Meilin called out, taking a defensive stance. Her sword gleamed in her hand.

“Uraza!” Abeke yelled, calling out to the Great Leopard.

“Briggan!” Conor held out his arm as the silver-gray wolf joined him.

The Greencloaks stood together in a semicircle, facing a dozen Oathbound, many with spirit animals of their own. Sid’s wolverine was already snarling, ready to face off against Briggan. A white tiger growled at Uraza.

“Jhi!” Meilin said, but her eyes were fixed on Xanthe lying on the floor. The girl was still breathing, but she was unconscious and bleeding out fast.

The large panda flashed onto the scene. Rollan knew Jhi would be a fierce fighter and improve Meilin’s own battle skills, but perhaps that wasn’t what the girl had in mind.

Still ... she’d need a distraction.

Rollan scanned the room, taking in the placement of every Oathbound, every monk, and every object in the room. Behind the anguished Takoda there were spears, shields, and swords hanging on the wall. If Rollan could free the monks and get them those weapons, their numbers would increase dramatically. Between them and Kovo, the Greencloaks might have a real chance.

*Xanthe* might have a chance.

Across the chamber, Master Naveb coughed. Rollan locked eyes with the old man just as Naveb quickly lifted the edge of his robe and revealed a key tied to his ankle. He gave Rollan a quick nod and motioned to Kovo. Naveb had the key to unlock Kovo’s chains!

“Fine.” Sid grinned cruelly. “You want to fight? We’ll fight.”

Rollan readied himself to sprint.

A screech from somewhere in the room caught everyone’s attention ... especially Rollan’s. It sounded like

Essix. Rollan's eyes flicked over to the closed window. How had the falcon gotten in, and where was she now?

Another screech, but something was off. Rollan glanced upward, where he saw a tiny black bird perched in the rafters. It was the same bird that had stolen his food out on the savannah! The drongo flew onto the shoulder of a girl with curly red hair. The Oathbound fished a snack from her pocket and gave it to her spirit animal, sneering at Rollan the whole time.

*That little sneak. It had imitated Essix's call.*

Sid rolled his shoulders confidently and continued talking. "If you choose to fight us, all you'll accomplish is more bloodshed ... your own. Surrender is your only option."

Meilin scoffed. "Never."

"You'll just kill us anyway," Conor added.

Abeke narrowed her eyes. "Once we're of no use to you."

"Now, now, friends," Rollan said, taking a small sideways step. If he could just get to Kovo, then Master Naveb would toss him the key. "Sid here seems like a smart guy. I mean, he obviously knew we were coming. I'm guessing a little bird told you."

Sid looked over at the drongo and chuckled. "Yes, Kasmira can be very useful."

This time the bird chirped like a nightingale in response.

Rollan took another step. "So you must also know that the Greencloaks have vast resources. We can make a person very wealthy."

"If it's more gold you want," Abeke said, catching on that Rollan had a plan of sorts, "we can always come to some type of arrangement." She began slowly moving away from the group in the opposite direction.

The Oathbound soldiers shifted, cautiously spreading out in order to remain in front of each Greencloak.

“Such as?” Sid asked as Conor took a couple steps forward.

“Gold, of course,” Conor said. “And we know many influential people.”

Rollan could see that Sid was interested. They just needed a little more time.

“I can’t believe that you would offer him anything!” Takoda cried out from beside Xanthe. “Look what he did!”

“Hush, boy,” Master Naveb scolded.

Rollan ignored Takoda’s anguish and took another step closer to the window. “It would seem that you hold all the cards, so why don’t you set the terms?”

Meilin lowered her sword, as if willing to entertain the idea as well. “Just tell us what you want.”

Sid’s expression changed as he stared at Meilin. The eager gleam was replaced by a rigid grimace. “There is nothing I want,” he stated, his back straightening. It almost looked as if he were about to salute her. “My captain … we await your orders.”

Rollan was confused, but when he turned to look at Meilin, it was the person who was standing behind her who surprised him.

Anka.

Meilin spun around and came face-to-face with the Greencloak. Anka now had a knife pointed directly at Meilin. The same knife that had stabbed her. Her shirt was no longer stained with blood.

The truth dawned slowly on Rollan. The whole thing had been an illusion. Anka had actually caught the knife and used her chameleon ability to make it seem as if she’d been mortally wounded.

“Anka?” Meilin took a half step back. “What’s going on?”

“Captain, I … I’m glad you’re not hurt.” Sid’s voice quavered. “I truly did not realize that—”

“Enough!” Anka stopped Sid’s prattling with a wave of her hand. “Yes, Sid, your blindness has become painfully obvious. You didn’t even realize that the old man has Kovo’s key *in his hand*.”

“I knew I didn’t like you from the moment I couldn’t see you,” Master Naveb said.

“Oathbound,” Anka called, “arrest them all!”

Each Greencloak took a defensive stance. They wouldn’t go down without a fight. Rollan knew that the battle for their lives was about to begin.

Anka stared at Meilin. “Except for her. This one … this one is mine.”



## HONEST FIGHT

**M**EILIN'S HEAD WAS SPINNING. SHE COULDN'T BELIEVE Anka had betrayed them ... that she'd apparently been working with the Oathbound all along. None of them had suspected her of being a spy.

"You seem so surprised," Anka said as she and Meilin circled each other. All around them, fighting had broken out between Greencloaks and Oathbound. Distantly, Meilin heard Abeke scream, but she didn't dare look away from the enemy facing her. "Did you think you were the only Zhongese girl to want more?"

"More what? More treachery?" Meilin turned the sword in her hand. "How could you, Anka? We were *friends*."

"It's nothing personal," the young woman said with a shrug. "Fate put us on different sides of this conflict. You win your battles through combat. I win in my own way. Plus, you're the one who told me: 'In a real battle for life and death, you shouldn't worry about what is and isn't fair.'"

Jhi barked urgently, a low, plaintive sound that cut through the noise of the hall. Meilin spared her spirit

animal a quick glance and saw that Jhi was watching Xanthe with anxious eyes.

“She’s lost a lot of blood,” Anka said. “Probably just on the verge of death. So what will you do? Will you sacrifice your spirit animal’s help? The last time we sparred without her, I nearly beat you.”

Meilin glared. “Go, Jhi. I can handle the likes of *Anka*, myself.”

The panda exploded into action, loping across the chamber toward Xanthe and Takoda.

Anka smirked. “Wrong call,” she crooned.

Meilin lunged at her with her sword, but Anka spun away, landing a kick against Meilin’s hip at the same time. “And since you bring it up … my name isn’t really Anka. It’s Kana. Kana the Honest.”

Kana disappeared, her cloak dissolving into the background like mist burning away in the sun.

Meilin jabbed at the empty air around her, unsure of where Anka … or Kana … had gone.

Then she felt her legs being swept out from under her. Meilin fell back and slammed her skull against the hard floor.

Now her head *truly* spun. Meilin forced herself up, bracing her unsteady feet. She glanced nervously around her. In a fight where she couldn’t see her enemy, she had to trust her other senses.

A slight rustling sound told her what she needed to know. Meilin did a backward handspring and sliced through the air with her leg, making hard contact with the unseen Kana.

“Ugh!” Kana grunted.

Meilin struck again, landing a second kick. As she went for a third, she felt a sharp pain in her upper leg. She screamed, stumbling back and leaving a trail of blood in her wake.

Retreating to a corner of the room, Meilin held her sword in front of her. Her wound wasn't serious, but it was too difficult to fight an invisible opponent. Kana could have cut an artery if she'd struck her in a different place.

"That was a warning," Kana said, as if reading Meilin's mind.

Meilin couldn't believe Kana's skill. She was a much better fighter than she'd pretended to be. Meilin could *not* underestimate her.

"You've learned a lot," Meilin said, trying to find Kana's location through her voice.

"Ha!" Kana's laugh came from Meilin's left. "You thought I was learning how to fight.... I was only learning how you fight."

Meilin spun her sword in front of her like a protective barrier. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Conor fighting off three Oathbound warriors with his ax and a sword he'd picked up from somewhere.

"Things don't have to be this way, Meilin." Kana's voice had switched sides, now coming from the right side of the room. "You could join us. Work for me. I know how much you love Zhong. So did your father."

"Leave my father out of this!" Meilin shouted, her eyes straining to see where the voice was coming from. But the only thing she saw were her friends, battling the Oathbound. Rollan defended against two attackers, giving Abeke cover as she shot arrows at some archers who were perched on the rafters. Uraza and Briggan were each tangled up under weighted nets that had been thrown over them.

Things weren't looking good. Meilin needed to level the playing field. She *had* to defeat Kana.

"Think about it, Meilin," Kana said. "Zhong needs more women like you. Strong and brave and unafraid to fight for what they believe in. It's why I started the Oathbound. The

military wouldn't have me, so I formed my own company. The time of the Greencloaks is over, but you can still serve your nation."

"You're nothing but mercenaries," Meilin snarled. "Without the Greencloaks, the nations will be at each other's throats, and then who will you *serve*? The highest bidder? Being a Greencloak means recognizing that we're all in this together. We all bleed the same. Helping others, wherever they are, is the right thing to do."

Meilin caught sight of the large fireplace. An idea began to form. The ash could reveal Kana's location. Make it easier to fight her.

"You still don't understand," Kana answered with a sigh. She was standing somewhere to Meilin's right side.

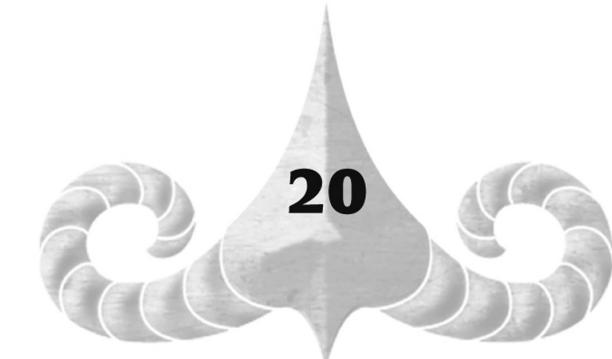
Meilin didn't waste any more time responding. She sprinted toward the fireplace, jumping over knocked-down chairs and beating down any Oathbound who dared to get in her way.

She grabbed a handful of ash and flung it in the air.

Kana coughed as the clouds of soot hit her. Meilin could see portions of the Oathbound spy outlined in the ash. Before Kana had a chance to camouflage herself again, Meilin tackled her, the two rolling onto the floor. Kana swiped at Meilin with her fists, but Meilin swiftly countered every one of Kana's moves, then she hopped lightly to her feet.

Spinning in the air, Meilin swung her leg, leading with a strong roundhouse kick. But Kana was ready. She grabbed Meilin's ankle, turned her leg, and slammed her down with a resounding thud. Before Meilin could roll away, Kana had the knife at her throat.

"So predictable," Kana lamented. "I thought you'd be more creative." She paused to glance over at the other Greencloaks, who were each being taken down. "But this is over. It all ends now."



## EXPENDABLE

**A**BEKE WAS DEVASTATED. THE GREENCLOAKS HAD PUT up a good fight, but they were outnumbered by a group that had been waiting for them for days. The Oathbound had exploited their every weakness, and now their fate was in Kana's hands.

All the monks had been taken away, including the heartbroken Takoda, who had to be carried out kicking and screaming when the Oathbound dragged Xanthe out of the hall. The Sadrean was alive, thanks to Jhi, but she hadn't woken up since being stabbed. When Abeke last glimpsed the girl, her already pale skin was nearly blue.

The only ones left in the Great Hall were Sid, Kana, and the four Greencloaks, who were sitting on the ground with their hands and legs tied.

"We're ready, Captain," Sid announced. He held a small blue bottle in his hand. "Do I knock them out?"

"I'm reconsidering sending them to Greenhaven to be tried with the other Greencloaks." Kana paced back and forth across the Great Hall. She was clearly visible to everyone.

Abeke noticed that now that Kana had shown her true colors, she no longer camouflaged herself as much.

“What? Why?” Sid glanced at Meilin before looking at Kana again. “Were you able to convince her to join us?”

“I’d never join you.” Meilin spat out the words.

“None of us would,” Rollan added.

Kana chuckled. “As if I’d accept any of you at this point.” She walked over to Rollan and bent down in front of him. “Before we forget.” She reached under his shirt and pulled out the Heart of the Land. She smiled as she slipped the chain over his head and put it around her own neck, tucking it under her collar.

Abeke could see the anger in Rollan’s eyes. She’d felt the same way when her bag with Stormspeaker was taken away. They’d risked so much, lost so much, to get those two bond tokens, and now the Oathbound had them.

“So what are we doing with them?” Sid asked as Kana gazed out the window. “Cordelia will be waiting for them.”

“Cordelia will just have to wait, then,” Kana replied, watching the sunrise.

“Cordelia the Kind?” Abeke didn’t want to get her hopes up too much, but if Cordelia had survived the cave-in, then maybe Worthy had, too. The Redcloaks might be able to help them somehow.

“Yes, but what’s it to you?” Sid asked.

“They’re worried about that heinous half-breed you captured,” Kana explained, turning to face the group again. “The former Trunswick kid.”

“So he’s alive?” Conor asked.

“Yeah, yeah … he’s fine,” Sid said. “Well, as fine as a mash-up of animal and human can ever be.” Sid shuddered for dramatic effect.

“Go ahead and knock them out with the potion,” Kana ordered. “That way we don’t have to worry about any feeble attempts at escaping.”

"I won't swallow that," Meilin declared, struggling with her ropes.

Kana cocked her head to the side. "Please, as if you have a say in the matter. Plus, this doesn't even involve you drinking it. We're much more sophisticated."

Sid opened up the bottle and poured a little on a handkerchief. "So they *are* going to Greenhaven?" He flashed a sinister smile as he stalked toward Conor. "This should be fun."

"No, they're not," Kana said. "You'll put them on our boat."

"To Xin Kao Dai?" Sid looked confused as he covered Conor's nose and mouth with the wet cloth.

"The catacombs there are riddled with deadly traps," Kana said. She watched impassively while Conor struggled against Sid's hands. "Better to have expendables like these four go in first, don't you think?"

Sid grinned as Conor stopped moving. The boy slumped to the side, unconscious.

"Who's next?" he asked, eyeing Meilin.

"Leave her for last," Kana said. "I want her to watch each one of her friends go down."

Sid let out a big, strong laugh. He was enjoying this. He approached Abeke and poured a little more of the liquid from the blue bottle onto the cloth before covering her face with it.

Abeke held her breath, not wanting to breathe in whatever was on the handkerchief.

"Kana, stop this," Meilin pleaded, trying with all her might to free herself. "The Greencloaks are innocent. You know we didn't kill the emperor."

"Oh, Meilin," Kana said as Abeke tried in vain to move her face away from Sid's powerful hands. "You really don't know anything at all."

And with those words, Abeke gasped for air and her entire world went dark.

**Christina Diaz Gonzalez** is the award-winning author of *Moving Target*, *Return Fire*, *The Red Umbrella*, and *A Thunderous Whisper*. Her books have received numerous honors and recognitions, including the Florida Book Award and the Nebraska Book Award, and have been named the American Library Association's Best Fiction for Young Adults, a Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People, and the International Reading Association's Teachers' Choice. More information can be found at [www.christinagonzalez.com](http://www.christinagonzalez.com).

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BOOK EIGHT

## THE DRAGON'S EYE

Conor, Abeke, Meilin, and Rollan are four young heroes who have dedicated their lives to fighting evil. They are Greencloaks, called from every corner of the world to defend Erdas. But now the Greencloaks lie broken. The order is imprisoned, and their legendary relics have been stolen.

Something huge and terrible is coming, and it plans to swallow the Greencloaks whole. If the four friends and their spirit animals are going to stop it, then they'll have to trust in their bonds.

They'll need to become more than just heroes:  
They must become legends.

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A sneak peek of the next



Book Eight

**The Dragon's Eye**

By Sarwat Chadda



## AT SEA

**R**OLLAN SHIFTED IN HIS HAMMOCK, VAINLY SEARCHING for sleep. The coarse sackcloth reeked, but it was better than being on the floor, where a film of seawater layered the wood and a company of rats nibbled at bare toes or exposed ears.

The ship's cramped brig had only one porthole—closed and on the far side of the corridor—so there was little ventilation. The air tasted stale and stifling, laden with the stink of too many days at sea.

The old wooden hull of the Oathbound schooner groaned against the weight of the waves. Then there were more sounds: a hiss, a crack, a scream.

“She’s at it again,” declared Conor.

Reluctantly, Rollan opened his eyes. He squinted until they adjusted to the permanent gloom of the cell, and then he saw his friends.

Conor slouched up against the bars, his arms hanging through the rusty iron, head tilted to the noise above.

He winced at the next scream.

Rollan rolled out of the hammock and past Abeke, who'd been woken by the cries echoing from above. She gritted her teeth. "It's Cordelia ..." she said. "Cordelia *the Kind*."

Meilin joined Conor by the bars, and flinched at the third cry, louder and sharper than before. "That poor man."

"There'll be no one to sail this ship if she carries on like this."

"What do you think he did?" asked Abeke.

Rollan shrugged. "He doesn't need to have *done* anything."

He thought back to their capture at the Niloan library, Maktaba. They'd been searching for the legendary bond token, Stormspeaker. They'd teamed up with Takoda and Xanthe, only to be betrayed—and captured—once they'd succeeded in gaining the token.

Takoda and Xanthe were chained and bundled on a ship to Greenhaven, while Rollan and his friends were headed to Zhong.

Conor glanced over at the scratches he'd been making on the wall. There were fifteen.

There was another hiss and cry, but now reduced to a pitiful whimper.

Fifteen days trapped down here. Fifteen days of hearing the cruel hiss of the whip and the cries of whatever poor unfortunate Cordelia had picked to torment, if for no other reason than that she could.

Why not them? She hated Rollan and his companions, yet Cordelia never chose to vent her cruelty on any of them. But sooner or later she'd grow bored of whipping sailors ...

Then she'd come down here and start on the prisoners.

Maybe she wouldn't begin with them.

The weary weeks at sea hadn't been spent totally alone. The Oathbound were bounty hunters, and clearly business was good.

Hunting Greencloaks seemed to pay well. The cell next to theirs held three more. They'd been brought on board a few days ago, and the news was grim.

Rollan knocked on the wall between them. "You awake, Kofe?"

There was a grunt and a return knock. Then a cough. "Of course. How can anyone sleep with what's going on up there?"

"Where were we?" asked Rollan.

Kofe laughed. It was a generous belly-rumble and Rollan felt it through the wood. "Best meal you've ever had. Mine was a squirrel. Cooked on a spit, out in the woods west of Greenhaven."

"Doesn't sound so special."

"I was real hungry, boy. Sitting out under the moon, quiet as you like. Nothing in the world but me and Sniffler."

Sniffler made his presence known with a squeak. Unlike everyone else here, the rat was quite at home in the hull.

Alongside Kofe was Lady Cranston, a distant relative to the Trunswicks, and Salaman, from northern Nilo. The three Greencloaks knew of Rollan and his friends, of course, and it was reassuring to have them on board, even if they were prisoners.

"You think they've caught everyone?" asked Rollan.

"Looking to get rescued?" Kofe replied. He sighed. "Who knows? The Oathbound have been planning this for a long time. The only reason we weren't caught sooner was because we were on a mission, far from Greenhaven. We won't be the only ones. There'll be Greencloaks hiding out, but with Olvan and Lenori captured, it's not looking good. We're on our own, boy."

*On our own.* Rollan was used to that.

Wasn't it supposed to be different? He was a Greencloak. The ancient order had allies everywhere, yet it had been taken down in a matter of months.

But some things rot from within.

Imposters had gotten themselves recruited into the Greencloaks. They'd learned its secrets, dug out its weaknesses. They'd publicly murdered the Emperor of Zhong while wearing the uniform, right as the Greencloaks were at their most vulnerable. When the blow came, the Greencloaks were swiftly blamed and imprisoned.

Imprisoned, like now.

There was one escape, however.

Rollan closed his eyes. It was getting easier and easier, connecting to Essix. She hadn't been captured with the other Greencloaks in Nilo, and was tailing the boat to see where they went.

Rollan closed his eyes and he was there with her, following their ship. His heart jumped as he soared amongst the clouds. The wind roared in his ears, buffeting Essix's sleek body. Or was it his? Now they were one and the same.

Essix cried out as she spun downward, piercing through a flock of panicked seagulls. Rollan laughed to see them break formation as they squawked in outrage. Essix merely flicked her wing tips and darted off.

This was pure freedom. His mind knew it was a fiction—he was trapped in the smelly belly of a ship—but his heart was filled with such joy that his chest swelled to bursting.

And pride. What animal could compare to Essix? Greatest of the Great Beasts!

He'd struggled, back when she'd first come into his life. He'd watched with jealousy at the way Meilin commanded Jhi, and the close, instinctive bond between Conor and Briggan.

As a street orphan he'd never owned anything valuable. Then he'd been given a Great Beast, one of the Four Fallen. Was it any wonder he'd struggled to understand such a gift?

He'd known people back in Concorba who'd been like him and struck it lucky. Most had squandered their good fortune and ended up back where they'd started sooner than they imagined.

Sure, he'd come close. Planning to run away from Greenhaven the first chance he'd gotten. Refusing to join until Tarik's death.

Sticking to his friends had taken a lot of courage, more than he'd imagined.

He could picture Greenhaven now. The towers and the surrounding sea of grass. The woods and the stables and the banners fluttering from the battlements.

He'd seen it through Essix's eyes, too. Many times, as they honed their bond together. Rollan had glided through the treetops as she accelerated toward the castle. The trees crowded around her, him, them, but she was too swift, too cunning to be trapped amongst the branches and boughs.

"Fly, boy, fly! Fly away if you can!"

Rollan snapped his eyes open.

"Wheeee!"

He ran to the cell door. "Will you shut up?"

"Ignore him," suggested Abeke.

"Wheee! Flap, flap, flap in the sky!"

The Greencloaks weren't the only prisoners down here. There was one other.

The mad old man.

As he was Zhongese, Meilin had tried talking to him at the beginning. The man ignored her, staring and mumbling and occasionally laughing wildly. The sailors found him amusing but Rollan just wondered why he was here.

Even now he was peering through the bars, whispering to himself. He caught Rollan's gaze and then beat his arms in the air, laughing as he flapped around the small cell of his.

"I'll be like that if I don't get out of here soon," complained Conor.

The hatch at the far end of the narrow corridor opened.

A column of light lit the ladder and a small diameter at the foot of it. Rollan's eyes watered; it was the first true sunlight he'd seen in days. Voices spoke and a couple of shadows passed at the hatch opening. One of them a woman.

Rollan clenched his fists. Maybe today was the day Cordelia came for him. He wouldn't go without a fight. A quick glance at his companions and he saw the same defiance.

But it wasn't Cordelia the Kind who descended into the semidarkness of the ship's hold.

It was Kana.

Once, they'd called her Anka. Rollan and the others had thought she was a Greencloak. A friend. But that had all been lie, right from the very beginning. In reality, she was the *captain* of the Oathbound, the mercenaries who had relentlessly pursued them. And like all high-ranking Oathbound, she carried a title that belied her true nature: Kana the Honest.

Unlike the others, however, Kana wore only a simple black uniform, dispensing with the usual brass collar and wrist guards.

*All the better to hide in*, Rollan thought despondently.

The traitor wrinkled her nose at the dank odors that hung in the uttermost depths of the hull. Almost daintily, she kicked aside a rat that had dared to come sniffing at her boot. Using the tip of her staff, she pushed open the porthole, and Rollan felt the sudden gust of fresh air.

Someone from above passed a lantern down to Kana and she raised it ahead of her. When its glow fell on them, all gathered at the cell bars. She smiled with cold satisfaction. "You've made yourselves at home, I see."

"There's room enough for you," said Conor. "Why don't you come in?"

Kana stepped closer, using her lantern to inspect their cell, but well out of reach of any sudden lunges. "Your journey is almost over. We're near the coast of Zhong and will be coming into dock by sunset." Kana smiled. "You have a friend who's eager to see you."

Rollan frowned. "A friend like Cordelia?"

"Cordelia can be unruly, I admit that," the woman said with a frown. "You should appreciate how hard it's been to stop her from coming down here and expressing her ... enthusiasm upon any of you."

"You didn't stop her from torturing the sailors," Rollan said.

Kana's response was a shrug. Apparently the pain of a few nameless sailors meant nothing to her.

How had they gotten themselves into this mess?

Rollan met Kana's gaze. "What about Worthy? Cordelia got out. So what did you do with *him*?"

Kana's eyebrows raised a hair, though her face remained otherwise still. "You won't be seeing him again."

Rollan didn't want to believe that. He glanced over at Conor. The two boys had grown up together. Conor was once Worthy's servant, back when the Redcloak went by Devin Trunswick. Worthy had come a long way from the obnoxious noble he was to become their ally, and friend. Together they'd found an ancient artifact in Eura, a sword named the Wildcat's Claw. Worthy had tried his best to prevent it from falling into the hands of Cordelia and the Oathbound, by bringing down the tomb where the sword had been hidden.

But the Oathbound had managed to retrieve the blade out of the collapsed wreckage.

It was now in Cordelia's hands. Rollan couldn't think of anything worse.

Who was he kidding? Of course he could. Easily.

Most of the ancient Greencloak gifts were now in the possession of Kana's mercenaries. They had the Claw, the Heart of the Land amulet, and the legendary Stormspeaker crown.

Only the Dragon's Eye remained ...

And there was no one left to stop them. With Rollan and his friends locked up here and the Greencloaks imprisoned in Greenhaven, the Oathbound were unstoppable.

Rollan and the others glanced up as they heard a heavy thump from the deck. The screaming abruptly stopped.

"Sounds like Cordelia's had her fun." Kana turned back toward the ladder. "The adventure is almost over, children."

The hatch slammed shut once she left, and Rollan heard the rattle of a bolt being shoved in place.

Conor shook the bars. "We've got to do something!"

Abeke put her hand on Conor's shoulder. "Save your strength. We may get our chance yet."

"But what if we don't?"

The breeze from the opened porthole was feeble, but Rollan appreciated it nevertheless. Seagulls squawked somewhere outside. Rollan knew that meant they were nearing land.

Who was waiting for them in Zhong? The Oathbound were mercenaries, but they'd long been in the employ of the various governments of Erdas. Rollan had a sinking feeling.

The only person he could think of was Princess Song, daughter to the emperor. The last time they'd seen her was following her father's death, shocked and heartbroken. Though once a supporter of the Greencloaks, it was ultimately Song who'd ordered their arrest.

Rollan peered closer at the small circle of light ahead. "She left the porthole open."

Meilin looked up. "It's too small, even if we could reach it."

Rollan smiled. "Too small for us. But not Essix. She's been following us since Nilo."

"But what can Essix do for us now?" asked Conor.

"Warn Greenhaven. The Greencloaks may be prisoners, but they're the only allies we've got. Maybe she can lead someone back to us."

Rollan whistled, just hoping the hatch was thick enough to muffle the sound. After a long, tense moment, no Oathbound goons had come to check on them ... but a shadow darkened the porthole.

A large gyrfalcon peered inside. The falcon shook out her wings and began preening herself.

"We don't have time for this, Essix." Rollan held his hand through the bars, toward the open porthole. Clutched between his fingers was a note, scratched on a scrap of leather he'd torn from his boot. "D'you think you can reach that?"

Essix let out a small cry, then shot into cabin. She'd snatched up the scrap of leather in a blink, landing on the floorboards just outside the cage.

Abeke grinned. "I think that's a yes."

Rollan smiled, kneeling and taking the scrap back. "Probably easier if you don't have to carry it in your mouth while you fly."

He rolled the cutting around Essix's leg, then tied it tightly with a second thin strip of leather. Rollan looked into the falcon's bright eyes. "This will tell whoever you can find that we're back in Zhong, and that the Oathbound have three of the relics."

Essix bobbed her head a few times then sprang into the air. It took a single beat and she darted through the narrow opening.

The image rushed unbidden and uncontrolled through Rollan's mind.

He felt himself darting over the waves. Looking through Essix's own eyes, he was startled to see her looking at him,

a small face craning at the light shining through the open porthole.

He marvelled at the sharpness of her vision, the clarity with which she saw the world. The colors were brighter, everything more defined, sharper. The dimming sunlight catching the sea spray as waves were thrown up against the glistening hull. The water droplets shone like rubies, momentarily frozen between rising and falling, then merged again with the sea.

Rollan stumbled and Conor caught him, setting himself back onto his feet. The boy looked at him quizzically. "You all right?"

Rollan glimpsed her swooping over the waves. Then Essix tilted vertically upward and was gone.

He turned back and was met by three expectant faces. "It'll take a day or two to reach Greenhaven and, even if help is coming, it'll be a while before it arrives."

Meilin sighed. "So we're on our own?"

Rollan shrugged, trying to project some confidence. "What's new?"

Sudden shouts drew their attention back to the ship, rather than the fleeing bird.

Rollan's heart quickened with dread. "You think Cordelia's starting on another one?"

Bare feet scurried upon the wooden boards above. The shouts weren't cries of pain, but commands. The ship creaked as the rudder turned against the direction of the waves.

"No," replied Meilin. "We're coming into port."

The sailors knew their business. They were clearly hurrying around the main deck, despite the presence of the terrifying Cordelia, or perhaps because of it.

It was only minutes later that the chains of the anchors rattled free. Rollan could hear them splashing loudly into the water. Ropes hissed through the air and the ship

buffeted again and again as the pilot worked to bring it against the quayside.

The hatch opened up. This time it was Cordelia.

The toes of her boots were sprinkled with blood.

Three sailors came in with her, one with manacles and the rest with swords drawn. Cordelia herself held the Wildcat's Claw, her gloved hand constantly clenching and unclenching around its hilt.

Rollan met her gaze. "I hope you're taking good care of that sword. We'll be wanting it back soon."

Cordelia drew it out by a few inches, just enough for the torchlight to catch its bright silvery edge. "Feel free to try and take it off me."

*She wants an excuse to use it.*

He wasn't going to give her the satisfaction. For now. But sooner or later, a chance might come up ...

One by one, the sailors manacled the Greencloaks. Cordelia glanced impatiently over her shoulder the whole time.

Climbing out of the hull wasn't easy with his hands bound, but Rollan managed. He blinked as the sunlight assailed him.

It took a few moments for his eyes to get used to it. They'd been held in the gloom for weeks and the sky was dazzling, even at evening time.

The others were equally stunned. But eventually sight returned.

They were in a natural crescent bay with high cliffs on three sides and the sea at their backs. The docks were lined with Zhongese soldiers. Apart from their vessel, there were only two other ships, much smaller, and a cluster of rowboats bobbing in the waves. Steps, cut into the natural rock, zigzagged their way up.

An elegant palace dominated the top of the cliffs. It was long and sinewy in design, with a suspended platform at

the very tip of the crescent.

“It’s ... beautiful,” breathed Rollan.

“Xin Kao Dai,” said Meilin, with a note of sadness. “The emperor’s Summer Palace.”

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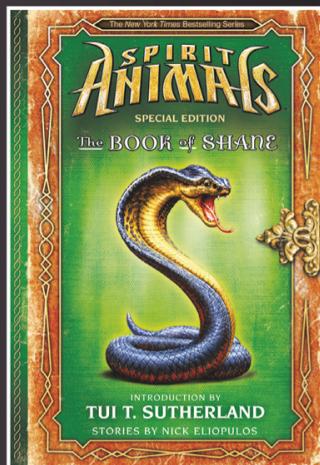
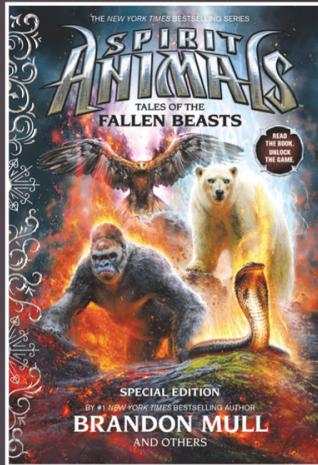
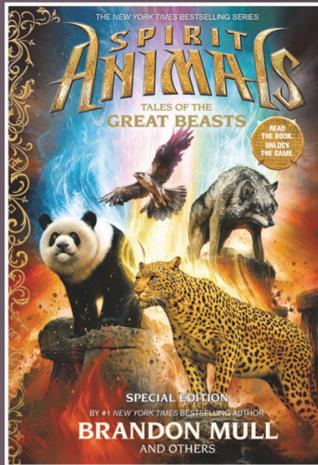
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